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Representations of Central and Eastern Europe in Contemporary
British Poetry
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INTRODUCTION

To the morality of a Western reader an account of these meetings would wear perhaps the sinister character of old legendary tales where the Enemy of Mankind is represented holding subtle mendacious dialogues with some tempted soul. It is not my part to protest. Let me but remark that the Evil One [...] is yet, on a larger, modern view, allowed to be not quite so black as he used to be painted.¹

The upsurge of British political verse in the wake of the Gulf War and eventually the 9/11 crisis has rekindled debate on the poet's ability to 'perform acts of the imagination when faced with barbarism'.² In a newly polarized world, British poets have apparently relinquished their insular retrenchment to diagnose the 'folie de grandeur/ of late capitalism',³ condemning the extreme individualism and aggressiveness inherent in the Western worldview. Emergent, militant poets cling increasingly to Owen's 'pity of war' and reject the 'good, brave causes of the older generation, whose expectations have apparently all been dashed by Thatcherism. Whatever its ideological substance, Thatcher's deregulation has promoted 'ideas – about education, welfare, legal process and basic equality – which [two decades ago] would have seemed to most people not simply disputable but frankly *immoral*.'⁴ It is therefore not surprising that anti-war protest should become *the* paradigm of moral commitment.

However, this increasing focus on renewed radicalism often results in a tendency to dismiss poetic trends which, in fact, preceded and paved the way for 'protest': as soon as the antagonism of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher years lost its flavour and urgency, there was a tendency to regard the 'committed' strain of poetry as non-radical, impaired by internal fragmentation and by lukewarm exposure. Yet, when the question, 'where now for political culture?' was raised by *Poetry Review*, writers invoked the diagnostic imagination of W.H. Auden rather than the British

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* ([1911] London: Penguin, 2007), p. 252.

² Andrew Motion, 'Afterword' to *101 Poems against War*, ed. by Michael Hollins and Paul Keegan (Faber & Faber, 2003), pp. 135-7, p.137.

³ Michael Hofmann, 'Nighthawks', in *Acrimony* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 30.

⁴ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 9.

version of the sixties anti-war protest, thus stimulating new perspectives on less immediately overt forms of poetic dissent.

While considering recent developments on the British scene, the present study foregrounds an obliquely radical aspect of the poetic trend which first came into prominence during the Thatcher years and developed in the following decade, represented by a group of writers born between 1937 and 1948: Tony Harrison, Ken Smith, James Fenton and George Szirtes. It was these poets who voiced the need for ‘individual commitment’ Jon Silkin had articulated early in the seventies, appealing to the ‘inner emigration’ of the increasingly popular Eastern European poets. A tendency to drop ‘islanded’ attitudes, Silkin argued, was under way in the U.K., as writers veered towards the ‘socially committed, causing some moves towards the discursive’.⁵ The kind of engagement Silkin urged upon poets living ‘in a free world’ was leavened by the Thatcher age, when many hitherto marginal stances achieved unprecedented coordination, ushering in critical views on the Western identity. Rather than in overt political denunciation, antagonism resulted then in controversial re-readings of post-war reconstruction, in the bridging of the public/private chasm and in the condemnation of social atomisation, visible respectively in the early work of Fenton and Harrison, in Szirtes’ outsider stance and in Ken Smith’s angry lyricism.

The contribution of Fenton, Harrison, Szirtes and Smith to the ‘State of the Nation’ question was paralleled by their international vocation, and, surprisingly enough, by a European vocation which ran against the political self-comprehension of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher age and which led them to explore part of the former Eastern bloc. This peculiar trajectory might originate in a shared sensitivity sharpened by the historical legacy which was being handed down on them, and which gives the lie to well-rooted images of a ‘depthless, dehistoricized English mainstream’.⁶

⁵ Jon Silkin, ‘Introduction’ to *Poetry of the Committed Individual* (Harmondsworth: Penguin and Gollancz, 1973), pp. 17-32, p. 26.

⁶ Elmer Andrews, “‘Some Sweet Disorder’: The Poetry of Subversion’ in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, ed. by Gary Day and Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 118-142, p.118.

In the first chapter, we will thus attempt to locate a variety of poetic dissent which absorbed and responded to the idiosyncrasies of the Thatcher age and its immediate aftermath. The indirection Fenton, Harrison, Smith and Szirtes share might be read against the backdrop of Thatcherism and the political drift towards ‘authoritarian populism’⁷ which was structured upon few, consistently pursued, ideological directions. These poets’ subtle insistence on their generation’s crushed expectations challenged the radicalism of Thatcher’s political thought and lingo (‘There is no such thing as Society’), which allowed the Conservative government to absorb the vacuum left by the crumbling of the liberal-democratic post-war framework.

Of course, it took some time before the countless blanks in the history of the Western ‘system of order’ came to the surface, and when they did, retrospection was partially hindered by the emergence of new ‘enemies’ of democracy, less known than the former Other, the Soviet bloc of the Cold War years, had been. The recent focus on the language of politics might be seen as the outcome of this re-configuration. As Harold Pinter has rightly stressed, it is extremely urgent for writers to grasp the Orwellian ambiguity through which the counterfactual language of politics becomes an instrument of coercion in the liberal world. Indeed, the transition of the most militant of the four poets considered, Tony Harrison, from the public scene of the eighties and early nineties to the protest of the late nineties is indicative of new challenges posed by ‘the hollow structures [...], the stale, but immensely successful, rhetoric of politics’.⁸

The increasing appeal to Orwell over recent years elicits, however, further considerations. Crucial to Orwell’s ongoing fortune is actually his foresight into a world characterised by the construction of an enemy as the condition for justifying the existing system of order. This line of argument stimulates readers to consider how the vacuum created by the disappearance of the ‘Other’ in the years that immediately preceded and followed 1989 (the ‘post-Wall’ age) created a unique space of discussion about Western ‘freedom’. Crucial to it was, above all, the structural questioning of the ‘ambivalent’ post-Enlightenment metanarrative, ‘the etiological myth [...] and

⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, *Marxism Today* (January 1979), 14-20, p.15.

⁸ Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Poetry, Prose, Politics 1948-1998* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998). p.188.

morally elevating story of humanity emerging from pre-social barbarity' inherent in both Western and Eastern European modernity.⁹

For Fenton, Harrison, Szirtes and Smith, this space resulted in an unprecedented interest in the former Other. This was not, however, 'far Russia' – the Cold War 'Other' by definition, and Konrad's referent in the epigraph above – but the Central and Eastern European regions, seen as a distinctive province of Europe rather than as the Western outpost of the former enemy. Surprisingly enough, the communist experience was not as central to the British poets' understanding of the 'other half of Europe' as was their concern with its history, and the memory which a forty-year division had occluded. Several factors, both generally cultural and strictly poetic, might account for their treatment of the question of 'Central-Eastern Europe'.

Ambivalence in the treatment of the former Other surfaced primarily in relation to a cluster of memories which the Cold War framework could, already in the early eighties, no longer contain and which 1989 definitely let loose: as Tony Judt maintains, 'the first post-war Europe was built upon deliberate *mis*-memory, [whereas] since 1989 reunited Europe has been constructed [...] upon a compensatory surplus of memory.'¹⁰ This declination of ambivalence keys to the work of poets who remapped the former 'Other', first of all, onto their experience and onto a shared geography of memory. Poets did not keep at a remove from the new visibility former Eastern bloc countries acquired, for example, in fiction. Yet they pursued a highly independent path across the former Eastern bloc, detaching from parallel developments in fiction because of their concern with the past and their radical detachment from the still well-rooted East/West divide.

In the second chapter, this distinctive path will be detected at the intersection between the cultural-political debates which attended the 'return' of Eastern Europe and the cross-curtain literary interbreedings which created an image of Eastern Europe before the Wall came down. No doubt poetic concern with Eastern Europe was primarily triggered by the actual re-emergence of this region within the geo-political configurations of the eighties; yet it may also be the result

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *The Bauman Reader*, ed. by Peter Beilharz (London: Blackwell, 2001), p. 241.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, *Post-War: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 829.

of specific politics of translation of Eastern European literature (poetry in particular), which drew British intellectuals close to the ‘question of Central-Eastern Europe’.

Especially after the *détente* of the seventies, the translation and reception of Eastern European poetry secured an increasing recognition of this region as distinct from ‘communist’ Russia among British poets, editors and translators born around 1930, such as Silkin, A. Alvarez, Ted Hughes, and Daniel Weissbort. Translated poetry seems crucial to capture the vision of Eastern Europe which was developed by the British poets of the following generation: it indirectly posited Eastern Europe as a region of European consciousness by securing detachment from ideologically biased readings. Far from fuelling anti-Eastern, anti-socialist feelings, Eastern poetry and Eastern dissidents were in fact instrumental in holding up a mirror to the West, and to Western Europe in particular: it was actually the ‘poetry of witness’, insightfully described by Czesław Miłosz in his 1981 lectures, that breached the East/West divide. As Seamus Heaney underlines in his *Government of the Tongue* lectures,¹¹ the ‘impact of translation’ was substantiated by the memorial legacy Eastern Europe shared with the West, but from which it had never disentangled itself. The Easterners’ distinctive ‘distrust of history’ and of post-Enlightenment cult of progress, as Milan Kundera called it, prompted a similar historical anamnesis in the West.

Close to Heaney’s ethical stance, Fenton, Harrison, Szirtes and Smith contributed to the representation of Eastern Europe by delving deep in the historical fractures its re-emergence brought to light. The three chapters which follow will attempt at investigating some aspects of the representation of Eastern Europe in Harrison, Fenton, Smith and Szirtes, by considering their cultural and political diagnosis of contemporary Great Britain and the mirror-glazing perspective through which Western Europe rediscovered its former Other.

The pioneer of recent poetic journalism, James Fenton provides a first example of the Western cautious attitude to the Eastern Other and in particular to Germany. Though he is currently part of the Oxford-based literary establishment, Fenton used to be a sort of wanderer:

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London, Faber & Faber, 1988).

his early poetry is tinged with curiosity about the ‘hot’ zones of the Cold War age and it often tackles the aftermath of political upheavals. Fenton travelled extensively across war zones (in Indochina, Vietnam, Cambodia) in his youth and crossed the Iron Curtain when the Wall was still there. His flawed attempt to read through Eastern opacity in Hungary and in Germany brought his journalistic career to a temporary halt but led him back to poetry and European history: his sequence ‘A German Requiem’ touches on the taboo of the memory of Second World War and of Nazism and on the suffering of the Germans. Playing on structural defamiliarization, perceptual shifting, *décalage* and journalistic ‘pseudo-objectivity’, Fenton offers a sharp diagnosis of Germany as paradigmatic of Europe’s division within itself as well as from its very past.

Unlike Fenton’s, Tony Harrison’s literary output is well-rooted in the provincial socio-political scene of Western Yorkshire and in his working class background. Emblematic of ‘regional’ and ‘class’ antagonism, his poetry has, from *the School of Eloquence* (1978) onwards, displayed a concern with language as an instrument of socio-political oppression, and of the retrospective ‘logic’ ruling nations, peoples, and social groups impose on history. While this concern has recently led him to embrace the ‘protest’ stance, his sensitivity to his generation’s genetic memory is what made him body forth a quite controversial English *and* European stance.

Harrison’s move away from Britain helps him retrieve both the narrative bent and the visual/visionary potential which his eloquence at times risks to obscure. His life-long concern with the consequences of the Second World War and less apparent nightmares permeates *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992), which reawakens the ghost of Nazism and that of the Allied ‘moral bombing’ on Northern Germany in 1945. Harrison totally rejects the memorial revival which was integral to the Thatcher and post-Thatcher official culture; interestingly, this aligns him to writers like W.G. Sebald and the Polish Zbigniew Herbert, who like him question the residual idealism inherent in historical revisionism. The Gorgon’s gaze was further explored when Harrison got interested in journalistic and documentary work after his short experience in Sarajevo at the time of the Balkan crisis. Around the mid-nineties, he thus worked on his post-Wall film/poem *Prometheus* (1998). Though shunning complex aspects of the socio-political

reality of post-communism, *Prometheus* offers an arresting depiction of the crushed dream of progress in the other half of Europe. Rather than promoting a superior Western gaze, however, Harrison regards Poland and Romania as counterparts of the bleak landscapes of Western post-industrialism, and in particular of 'his' Yorkshire. Through his bathetic use of classic models and his handling of visual/metaphorical chains, Harrison voices an uncompromising indictment of progress, depicting Auschwitz as a symbol of modern rationality rather than as an inviolable place of memory.

Harrison's sweeping vision and dramatic approach is replaced by a careful balance between detached reportage and lyrical bent in George Szirtes and Ken Smith. Between the mid-eighties and the late nineties, these poets contributed to the cultural representation of Eastern Europe by intercepting crucial modalities of Eastern European self-consciousness. Their depiction of Eastern Europe is actually informed by an 'Eastern' distrust of history: Szirtes foregrounds the Eastern European multi-layered, dense sense of history, as opposed to the West's looser historical sense, whereas Smith is spellbound by Eastern Europe's marginal role and its border status. Density and marginality embody two different but complementary readings of Eastern 'disorder', which is truly revealed as the product of Western projections.

Szirtes' very status as an *émigré* lends his writings a peculiar sensitivity to the displacements the Hungarians (and Romanians) endured in terms of political, ethnic-cultural identity and historical recognition. *Bridge Passages* (1991) is pervaded by Szirtes' distinctive anxiety about the possible erasure of memory once the Communist obsessive control of the past was over. The 'fable' of Eastern freedom is by no means taken at face value; distrust surfaces instead through the codedly political language of *Bridge Passages* and of poems featuring in his retrospective Bloodaxe collection *The Budapest File* (2000). Hinging on modalities borrowed from photography and painting, Szirtes' treatment of the Hungarian present decomposes reality into fragments. His misgivings about the possible Westernisation of the East are ushered in, together with attempts to salvage Eastern Europe's past, including the atrocious experience of Nazism, from amnesia.

The need to return history to the defeated runs throughout the work of Ken Smith, whose political and social allegiances are close to Tony Harrison. Smith's interest in Eastern Europe is consistent with his bitter, fierce analysis of Western progress: in his mid-eighties poetry, the orchestrated silence on social oppression and on human and ecologic losses in Thatcherite England strike him as the landmarks of a powerful collapse of democratic liberalism. Smith started to travel eastwards before the Wall came down. He wrote a reportage on the German revolution, *Berlin* (1990), and broader insights in the post-Wall atmosphere shaped his collection *The Heart, the Border* (1990), where the future of both post-Thatcher Britain and Europe is envisaged with scepticism. Further explorations of Hungary, the Trans-Carpathian areas and the Balkans – areas which have been virtually swept off European geo-political maps – drew Smith close to countries whose anomy is defined by conflicting histories where positive, reciprocal relativization might turn into the nightmare of extinction and apocrypha. Partly reportage, partly lyrical excursion, his poetry construes the once disputed borders between the East and the West as repositories of memories. Speaking through the lost voices of survivors, Smith's work turns his 1998 collection *Wild Root* into post-memorial poetry of witness.

I. Whither Britannia?

I.1 The British socio-political context from the eighties to the noughts.

For the generation which came to prominence between the mid-seventies and the eighties and which includes, apart from Tony Harrison, Ken Smith, James Fenton and George Szirtes, a host of central figures such as David Harsent (b. 1942), Peter Reading (b.1946), and Christopher Reid (b.1949), the Thatcher years were crucial to break through an insulated sense of culture, history and social understanding. All through the decade 1979-90, some strains of the British mainstream worked along with those ‘margins’ which were more evidently widening the social and geographic spectrum of British poetry.¹² Far from opposed, these strands were actually weaving in and out of each other both in socio-political concern and in their willingness to break through misleading representations of British cultural identity. This would become apparent in the years that followed, notably in the late-nineties convergence on shared practices of social commitment.¹³

While assessing their historical-social consciousness and individual experience through their interest in a largely unknown ‘other’ - Central and Eastern Europe - poets like Tony Harrison, Ken Smith, James Fenton and George Szirtes bodied forth the need to cast out new configurations of collective identity. The internal socio-political turmoil was no less relevant to such attempts than the international tensions which would emerge more clearly in the following decades. Yet it was through a slow, and far from unproblematic, detachment from the immediate context of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher age that the British mainstream opened up at new perspectives. The troubled backdrop of the eighties worked as a latent subtext to the poetry

¹² For the emergence of non-mainstream poetry in the eighties, in terms of gender, class and ethnic belonging, see Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry after 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), pp.195-204 and pp. 221-34; for a more specific focus on the relation between mainstream/non-mainstream writing, British cultural industry, university and cultural institutions, large/small presses and reviews, see Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

¹³ See the intra-generational ‘debate’ on protest and performance in *Poetry Review*, 87:3 (1997).

which emerged against it. It was likewise crucial to many poets' further attempts to confront the British nation with its European, recent past and to see how the socio-political anxieties inherent in the 'postmodern' condition refracted on the West, where the notion of liberal-democratic values was strongly destabilized.

In fact, already in the eighties and early nineties attempts were made to encompass the crisis that culminated in the Thatcher era, one where, as John Hill underlines:

The polarization along lines of class, of race, of religion, of nationality and language recalled similar breakups elsewhere in Europe. [This makes] the 1980s a period of momentous social shifts well beyond Thatcherism and supports the view that violent social tensions are often the best soil for the flowering of resilient, contesting, and confrontational arts, obliging artists to rediscover themselves as social counterforces and moral consciences.¹⁴

This socio-cultural shift developed through the adoption of different, specific choices in terms of genre and modulations in the textual subjectivity. The very spectrum defined by such different poets as Harrison, Fenton, Smith and Szirtes shows how at that critical juncture of British history, the implications of political poetry and of its public resonance were leading to contradictions which would, in fact, backfire through the following decades.

It is crucial to stress how, while paving the way for a post-ideological age, all these poets – like their European fellow-writers – experienced and internalised the impending collapse of a forty-year-long bilateral *Weltanschauung*. This, together with the neoliberal drift of British politics and its social consequences, ran parallel to a multi-layered, in-depth polarization in socio-political understanding. In Great Britain, the Cold War 'thawing'¹⁵ was actually backed by two different processes: on the one hand, the actual re-articulation of socio-political relations within a post-industrial, post-national and multi-cultural context; on the other hand, the final collapse of a consensual vision deeply fraught with post-war liberal-humanistic values, which the

¹⁴ John Hill, *British Films in the 1980s: Issues and Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p.56.

¹⁵ Following Eric J. Hobsbawm (*Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph, 1994) and John Lewis Gaddis's *Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), the term 'Cold War' is generally used here to indicate the forty-year confrontation between the Western and the Eastern bloc that ended with the collapse of the latter in 1989. The term late Cold War will be used to refer more specifically to the period running from the late seventies (the post-*détente* phase) to the late eighties, when a global and a 'European' re-escalation occurred following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the nuclear rearrangements during the Reagan era on the one hand, and the repression of the Solidarity movement in Poland on the other hand.

class-ridden and national/ethnic conflicts of the eighties helped explode. For writers who were born during or soon after the Second World War, to rediscover themselves as ‘moral consciences’ meant, first of all, to redirect the highly ambivalent potential lurking in the post-war context that framed their cultural and social identity. The impulse to recognize any possible division from communitarian allegiances, which had emerged so strongly in the seventies, was exasperated by the radical discourse on class and national belonging of the Thatcher age. Such slippage might, however partially, account for the rather ‘insular’ scope of much mainstream poetry in those years when the margins were dismantling the very notion of Britishness. Only seemingly, however, did national concerns hinder the politicization which was necessary to widen the perspectives on British verse. In fact, the poets who held back from any direct espousal of political, communal stances were also displaying an unprecedented awareness of their inner impasses, as the interplay of regional or working class language and standard English adopted by Harrison, Seamus Heaney and Peter Reading clearly shows.¹⁶ ‘Insularity’ was therefore explicitly acknowledged and would soon be resisted, mostly through the recognition of a wider, and first of all European, dimension where internal tensions could be re-framed.

Paradoxically enough, the eighties did not signal a major departure from the detached interpretive frames through which much mainstream writing had filtered social observation and historical awareness since the seventies; such detachment would be in fact variously declined through that decade and the nineties. It was rather the distinctive realization of a specific, deep-rooted trope of socio-cultural ‘outsiderism’ that managed to deflect that large ‘privatisation of experience’ Eric Homberger had detected as early as the late seventies.¹⁷ A slant, and as will be shown later on, often anti-lyrical perspective ultimately proved instrumental to transcend the urgent and largely unsolved State-of-the-Nation stance which had surfaced in the very language

¹⁶ On the markers of Bakhtinian ‘addressivity’ (vocal posturing, ventriloquism, language overlay) relevant to the working class, or the underclass, background in Tony Harrison’s and Peter Reading’s poetry of the eighties, see Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Post-war Poetry* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 121-158.

¹⁷ See Luke Spencer, “‘The Grudge is True’: Working-class poetry in post-war Britain”, *Literature and History* 3:1 (1992), 29-48, p.30.

of oppositional writers since the seventies and which was controversially leavened by Thatcherism.¹⁸

Such broad outsiderism certainly blunted the political radicalism that might have derived from a closer social diagnosis; and yet, despite or because of its self-divisions and impasses, it was the generation of Harrison and Smith that first led to the emergence of a broader international context where domestic socio-political concerns were displaced and brought back to latent, unsolved historical questions. If, as Antonio Scarsella suggests, a new language of ‘global poetry’ emerged in the nineties, such shift originates in the very fractures of the eighties.¹⁹ These fractures might thus be used as a standpoint to measure the rarefied but significant contact between British poetry and the wide-ranged Eastern ‘Otherness’ before and after 1989, and its specific impact in terms of poetic debate, historical imagination and cultural self-comprehension.

Central to the dissent developed within the ‘inner canonical poetry’²⁰ over the last decades was the achievement of a self-critical stance fuelled in the first place by the eighties socio-political crisis, one which entailed the utter ‘disintegration of the post-war ideological framework’²¹ represented by the egalitarian premises of welfarism as much as by the universalistic liberalism of post-war education. Such experience would prove crucial to those poets who, as Peter Childs remarks,

had not experienced the war, the eclipse of the British Empire, or life before the invention of mass-consumerism, rock and roll, and the ‘teenager’ in the 1950s, but had grown up instead with the welfare state and the Cold War, appreciating both high and popular culture, the literary tradition and the television.²²

A brief glance at contemporary poetry might be useful to pin down the frames of reference of this generation’s worldview, and to see how these emerged in the pre-Wall and post-Wall

¹⁸ See Terry Eagleton’s Bakhtinian reading of Tony Harrison’s poetry (‘Antagonisms’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991), pp. 348-352), to which we will return in our discussion in chapter four.

¹⁹ Antonio Scarsella, ‘Antefatti anglo-italiani’, in *Giovane Poesia Inglese*, ed. by Gregory Dowling (Venice: Edizioni del Leone, 1996), pp. 180-195, p.186.

²⁰ Peter Barry interestingly articulates the balance between an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer’ canonical poetry in *Contemporary Poetry and the City*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 11-16.

²¹ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in post-war Great Britain* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.65.

²² Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: a Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.145.

context.²³ The acknowledged difficulty to outline some major trends within the ‘mainstream’ makes any attempt to evaluate the continuities and disruptions that have characterised recent poetic strains necessarily provisional.²⁴ Nevertheless, the upsurge of a strain of politically committed poetry provides a stimulating vantage point to chart developments which took shape, although rather obliquely, in the Thatcher decade;²⁵ more specifically, it helps to foreground the articulation of a latent documentary impulse which, in our view, differently enabled James Fenton, Tony Harrison, Ken Smith and George Szirtes to frame moral questions central to their historical consciousness.

It is actually from the mid-nineties onwards that the emergence of hard-hitting political verse has brought about a renewed concern with poetry as public utterance, and as political agency. This concern was not unprecedented but reached back, in fact, to the ambivalent engagement of ‘protest poetry’ in the late sixties.²⁶ Like thirty years before, and in keeping with European and world-wide cultural undertows, widespread dissent with governmental foreign policies and British involvement in military action galvanised commitment in the arts; this was fuelled by a crescendo of events, from the reaction to the Yugoslavian conflict and the Gulf War to the furore raised by the Labour leadership’s alliance with the USA in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.²⁷ The latter episode was particularly significant, since its impact on poetry was almost immediate. Not

²³ Ludmilla Kostova has been the first to introduce the term ‘post-Wall’ in the context of contemporary literature (‘Inventing Post-Wall Europe: Visions of the “Old Continent” in contemporary British fiction and drama’, *Yearbook of European Studies*, 15 (2000), 83-102. For a further discussion on its connotations, see Christoph Houswitschka and Edith Hallberg, eds, *Literary Views on Post-Wall Europe* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2005), pp. 51-63.

²⁴ On the ‘programmatic’ introductions to anthologies which will be mentioned in this chapter, see Peter Forbes, ‘British poetry in the last thirty years’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 6:1 (2002), 9-18.

²⁵ Far from being exhaustive, the overlook on British mainstream provided by the following collections might show, for all their modal diversity, shared concerns with recent political panoramas and more specifically US and UK-led wars: Tony Harrison’s *Under the Clock* (London: Penguin, 2005) Harold Pinter’s *War* (London, Faber & Faber, 2003), David Harsent’s *Legion* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005) and Chris McCabe’s *The Hutton Inquiry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005; see, in particular the ‘Progress Poems’ section).

²⁶ An outline of the sixties commitment, with reference to the work of Adrian Mitchell, Brian Patten, Adrian Henry, and to events such as Poetry Incarnation Festival (1965) and the first Poetry International (1967) can be found in Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). A highly sceptical reading of the relation between the late sixties commitment and the mainstream contemporary scene is provided by Andrew Duncan in *The Failure of Conservatism in British Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003), pp. 75-137.

²⁷ The political backdrop to contemporary protest anti-war poetry is explored through the work of Tony Harrison in Bruce Woodcock, ‘Classical vandalism: Tony Harrison’s invective’, *Critical Quarterly* 32:2 (1990), 50-65.

only did the anti-war artistic movement hinge on initiatives such as international and intergenerational anthologies, which overtly tackled the issue of war and Western political dominance, and of political and civil rights.²⁸ The political strain was also characterised by a spontaneous foregrounding of poets as public voices, and its often performative cast led to interdisciplinary alignments, notably between poets and dramatists.

Significantly enough, the underlying dispute between art and journalism²⁹ was echoed by an emerging concern with the language or rather the rhetoric of politics which Harold Pinter, in his conversion from drama to poetry, came to body forth most visibly. Not only the British government, but British quality press and broadcasting became the targets of such critique; this focused on the media as active agents in that gradual process of ‘adiaphorization’, which in Zygmunt Bauman’s view is implemented by the technological warfare, by ‘politic’ agreements on the limits of media coverage and by the growingly blurred boundaries between the real and the virtual, all processes which are pivotal to the Western-controlled power relations.³⁰

That the toll of war, and of the manipulative politics of information, should appear more impressive to poets who grew up in the post-war years is hardly surprising. The Cold War Manichean backbone had, in the first place, structured their shared paths of historical

²⁸ The anthology *101 Poems against War* (2003) featuring British as well as international poets was soon followed by a successful ‘small press’ counterpart, *Poets Against the War* (Cambridge, Salt, 2003); everyday update on the poetic movement is provided by the website www.poetsagainstthewar.co.uk The wide extent of such phenomenon can be seen, on a European level at least, in the parallel emergence of anti-war poetic fronts in France (‘Poètes contre la guerre’) and in Germany (the interdisciplinary movement ‘Künstler gegen den Krieg’).

²⁹ A telling example was *War Correspondence*, an interdisciplinary event organized at the Royal Court in 2003 where plays, alongside with documentary pieces and ‘newsreel’ were the object of debate centring on the participation to the Iraq war. The event was supported by the dramatists Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp and David Williams, and the poet Tony Harrison among others. For a comprehensive overview on the political theatre in the nineties and noughts, and its relation to the political context and the media, see Theodor Shark, *Contemporary British Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); in particular, see Shark, ‘The Multiplicity of Theatre’ pp. 3-18, Helen Dunn, ‘Saved, Sated or Satisfied: The Languages of British Theatre Today’, pp. 18-42, and Martin Esslin, ‘Electronic Media and British Dramatists’, pp. 169-180. For a specific focus on the tamed radicalism of the eighties, see John Bull, *Stage Right: Crisis and recovery in British Contemporary mainstream theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1994). A recent overlook on the British theatre and politics in the last two decades is in Michael Billington’s reflection on theatre (*Observer*, 25 October 2007).

³⁰ Crucial to the context of an increasingly technocratic society, the notion of ‘adiaphorization’ implies that the meaning of individual actions is gradually divorced from the recognition of and responsibility for their short-term and long-term effects; as a consequence, according to Bauman, ‘those very actions are perceived and experimented as morally neutral’. Zygmunt Bauman, ‘A Century of Camps?’, in *The Bauman Reader*, ed. by Peter Beilharz (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p.287.

apprehension – not only a sense of history but the projection into a potential ‘end’ through nuclear warfare. In the second place, it had framed widespread patterns of information and of collective memory with its strategic obscuration of the ‘other side’ of the curtain. The sense of a diffused conflict that would largely permeate the post-wall context was therefore no news to these poets.³¹ Their strong disillusionment with politics might be similarly related to the high Cold War years. The post-war abrupt shift in geo-political patterns, the post-Auschwitz context and the age of Khrushchev’s disclosures had, after all, often resulted into a reaction to ‘ideological’ commitment and to that post-1945 sense of moral victory (the ‘post-war dream’ of Roger Warner’s 1983 “Requiem”)³² too soon embedded into the Cold War dichotomic world-view.

Long before the triumphal nationalism of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict and the re-intensification of Cold War tensions rekindled anti-war feelings in Tony Harrison’s generation, the overlay of conflicting narratives that framed the end of WWII was poignantly captured in his private/public ‘journals’:

One of my very earliest memories [...] is of a street party with a bonfire and such joy, celebration and general fraternity as I have never seen since. As I grew up the image stayed but I came to realise that the cause of the celebration was Hiroshima. Another is the dazed feeling of being led by the hand from a cinema into the sunlit City Square after seeing films of Belsen in 1945.³³

The all-pervading sense of moral ambiguity about what soon would become History, and the implicit shock which intrudes on the poet as ‘beholder’ extend, as Rick Rylance points out, to a whole generation for whom the notion of ‘war’ was primarily connected to an interrogation of post-war narratives of victory.³⁴ Over the last three decades, in fact, the concentration camp, the destruction of Hiroshima, and the last years of war formed a constellation of obsessive images

³¹ See Abbott Gleason and Martha Nussbaum, ‘Introduction’ to *On Ninety-Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 1-10.

³² ‘Brezhnev took Afghanistan/Begin took Beirut/Galtieri took the Union Jack/and Maggie over lunch one day/took a cruiser with all hands/apparently to make him give it back.’ Roger Waters, ‘The Final Cut: a Requiem for the Post-war Dream’, in Gerhard Häfner, *Englische Lyric vom Zweiten Weltkrieg bis zur Gegenwart: Konzepten, Themen, Strukturen*, (Heidelberg: Universität Verlag, 1997), p.125.

³³ Tony Harrison, ‘Fire and poetry’, in *Collected Film Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), pp.257-284, p.269.

³⁴ Rick Rylance, ‘Doomsongs: Tony Harrison and war’ in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. by Sandie Byrne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp.137-160, pp. 139-144.

which gave the lie to any residual post-war ‘illusion’ and did so especially at the time of Thatcher’s resurgent nationalism. No less than Ted Hughes or Geoffrey Hill’s generation, Harrison’s generation was, as we will see, particularly haunted by the re-emergence of non negotiated histories.

The end of the Cold War seemed to reinforce a retrospective drive which was lurking even in writers who did not share Harrison’s embattled tones, and who could then bring similar ambivalences into sharper relief. At the end of Ken Smith’s collection *The Heart, the Border* (1990), the speaker’s claim that ‘telling our tales, we grew up on the other side/ of a long long war we all lost’³⁵ leads to his impression, while travelling across post-1989 Central Europe, that all that remains is to witness

victories understood only in the vernacular,
and we with our own debased currency another history

glimpsed in the driving mirror, central Europe
on fast forward: printout, flags, bullets,
disbelief on the faces of tyrants,
end of system without escape clause. Walls fall and men. (60).

Smith’s ‘Passing Through’ is more than a deadpan counterpoint to the post-wall, short-lived boost in Western self-confidence. Significantly, Smith’s low-tuned commentary betrays no more hope or expectation than the dispatches which open the collection and where England is defined as a ‘free enterprise disaster zone’ (*The Heart, the Border* 20). The post-Wall sense of collapse extends, as it were, to a much wider, international context; the very end of war may prove as illusory as any indication of its ‘beginning’; so proves the notion of border and boundary, despite the material, objective destruction of the Berlin Wall and of the post-1961 borders. Smith demystifies such notion during the conflict-ridden pre-Wall world as much as after its disappearance. If the U.K. was seen, in his ‘1984 Tour of Britain’ as a land controlled ‘by

³⁵ Ken Smith, ‘After Brecht’, in *The Heart, the Border* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990), p.62. All further references are to this edition.

missiles [...] / on a page deleted in the interest of national security',³⁶ the later poem testifies to an even stronger sense of international unbalance. Smith's short reportage is written from the margins of those images 'of joy and celebration' that in the West at least have framed the 1989 events forever. Moreover, his allusion to zones where borders are blurred and war is neither lost nor won ominously foreshadows the controversy raised by Western participation in the Yugoslavian conflict – the first European conflict since the Second World War – and by the later engagement in the Gulf War. In fact, these moments triggered off those ambivalences tucked in British collective memory, and proved Harrison's and Smith's concerns less idiosyncratic than one might have expected. Just one year after the release of the book, British strategies of broadcasting censorship employed in Iraq invited harsh comparison with uncomfortable Second World War memories, such as the bombing of civilians in Northern Germany conveniently obscured after Winston Churchill's notorious remark: 'Are we beasts? What would the British public have said?'.³⁷

The ambivalences underscored by both Harrison and Smith are indeed so well-rooted that they still seem to animate poetry, especially protest poetry, and match the distinctively anti-media gist with which poets are now reviving the etymological meaning of 'obscenity'. This approach seems certainly justified, considering how for Harrison's and Smith's generation the perspective of an ending – with its cognate impulse to transcend such a perspective, as Steven Connor points out³⁸ – has resulted in the reversibility between the imaginary and the real. The high-pitched tone many writers, including Harrison, have adopted betrays, in the first place, the need for a language which might expose the off-stage facets of a (now) projective democratic narrative.

³⁶ Ken Smith, '1984 Tour of Britain', in *Shed: Poems 1980-2002* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2002), p.81. The poem was originally published in *Terra* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986). *Shed* is Smith's second and last retrospective collection.

³⁷ For the mediatic coverage of the Gulf War, and the independent and art-supported counter-information that was prompted, see Alastair Hulbert's and Alastair McIntosh's retrospective on the '*Gulf Watch papers*', *Edinburgh Review*, 87 (1991-2), 15-71.

³⁸ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950 to 1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.200.

The tendency to regard poetry as a possible realisation of public consciousness, exorcizing fears lest the media might ‘become instruments of the government’s propaganda’ as the BBC writer and adapter Andrew Davies recently claimed,³⁹ has however met with scepticism, not least within the cultural establishment.⁴⁰ Ironically enough, the sharp anti-rhetorical impulse has often proved crippling: detractors lament the fact that a traditional genre such as the invective should be replaced by propaganda or, to put it in MacNiece’s phrase, that words should be ‘travestied in slogans’.⁴¹ This has helped to cast some light on the renewed commitment of the nineties and the noughts and the kind of political discourse supported by New Labourism.⁴² It is then arguable whether much ‘protest’ poetry should be understood as a rejoinder to political language, or as a mimicry of its Orwellian ambiguity – the ‘doublespeak’ which Homi Bhabha regards as crucial to our age⁴³ and which Bauman regards as an agent of adiaphorization. In this respect, the anti-Americanism and overt detraction of Blair’s government in Pinter’s notorious ‘God Bless America’⁴⁴ might simply fail to provide any alternative ‘language’.

Whether positive or negative, the current reaction to engaged writing endorses the public stance of writers such as Harrison and Pinter, whose anti-war poetry entails both individual, subjective exposure and willing inclusion into some representative first-person-plural subject. Struggling with socio-political discourse and information, poetry has not only led to individual

³⁹ David Cracknell and Richard Brooks. “Charter will force BBC to back Britain.” *Sunday Times online*, 12 March 2006. Track: Davies, Charter. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>> [11 November 2006].

⁴⁰ Thus Tom Chivers comments Pinter’s and Harrison’s protest poetry: “Poetry stepped down to the level of the slogan. In this age of soundbites, a ‘political poem’ has become something you write on a placard. (‘Tear in the Fence 44’, *Penned in the Margins*, July 2007. Track: Harrison, Harsent.<<http://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk.htm>>). David Harsent seemed to harbor similar doubts when presenting his war-piece *Legion* as a reaction to ‘poetical ranting.’ (qtd. in Samson, ‘The Devil’s Wine’, *Guardian online*, 15 October 2005). David Wheatley provides an insightful investigation of anti-war protest poetry in his essay ‘Dichtung und Wahrheit’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.659-66.

⁴¹ Louis MacNiece, ‘Autumn Journal. III’, in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p.105.

⁴² See Claus-Ulrich Viol, ‘Free to Blast and Bullock Blairite Britain? Politische Lyriker und Blairs New Labour’, *Hard Times* 82 (2007), 35-8.

⁴³ Homi Bhabha, ‘Doublespeak and the Minority of One’, in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 29-37.

⁴⁴ ‘Here they go again/the Yanks in their armoured parade/chanting their ballads of joy/as they gallop across the big world/praising America’s God [.]’. Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Poetry, Prose, Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 256).

contentions with newspapers or broadcasting companies.⁴⁵ To some extent, what has recently been re-moulded is the very image of the leftist poet who, despite the engrained difficulty of envisaging an alternative socio-political system,⁴⁶ seems eager to accept the widespread critique against Western liberal democratic practice as *the* post-1989 surviving world-view, or the only surviving ‘model of order’.⁴⁷ It is mostly against such backdrop that the British mainstream has taken some tentative steps toward a global dimension, envisaging some kind of communal and resistant plural ‘voice’.

The last fifteen years have seen the cautiously ‘dissident’ voices of the Thatcher era buttress their oppositional stance with fervent democratic slogans in the Labour decade (Peter Reading is a case in point).⁴⁸ Their voices, however, have registered some sensible shift. For all its distinctive cast, Pinter’s poetry actually points to a broader tonal shift in committed verse by which some mainstream poets were also affected. Indeed, it is impressive how Pinter’s invective and his use of the obscene as a weapon of anti-media protest bear some striking similarities to Tony Harrison’s recent literary output, *Under the Clock* in particular.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ On the major aspects of Pinter’s polemic relation with the media – including his contest with the *Independent*, see *About Pinter: The Playwright and the Work*, ed. by Mark Batty (London: Faber & Faber, 2005) and, for a focus on his ‘Gulf War’ polemic, Harry Derbyshire, ‘Pinter as a Celebrity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), pp.230-45. A recent Italian study of Pinter’s relation to politics, and his action during the Thatcher years – Charta 88, the Rushdie affair - is Roberto Canziani and Gianfranco Capitta, *Harold Pinter: Scena e Potere* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005). A number of articles, interviews, and poems are available on Pinter’s website: <[http:// www.haroldpinter.org/politics.html](http://www.haroldpinter.org/politics.html)>.

⁴⁶ Both Alan Sinfield’s *Politics and Culture* and Patricia Waugh’s *Harvest of the Sixties* provide insightful readings of the post-1968 articulation of (new) left dissidence in the arts; it is especially Sinfield’s contention that the crisis and the re-articulation of leftist commitment from the seventies onwards revolved around an internal crisis in the Western model of late capitalism rather than on a disillusionment with European socialism and Eastern communism. See also Houswitschka and Hallberg, pp.51-63.

⁴⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *The Bauman Reader*, p.336. A significant example of such development in the leftist intellectual movement is provided by E.P. Thomson’s article on *The New Statesman* early in 1990. Thomson offers a disparaging portrait of Francis Fukuyama’s vision and of British-Western assumptions on the Westernization of the former Soviet bloc, while touching on the British government’s unresolved agenda: “Charter 88” and the constitution, the failed self-criticism for Nicaragua, the economic unbalance. (*New Statesman*, 12 January 1990, pp. 10-12).

⁴⁸ For a view on Peter Reading’s radical collections from the eighties onwards, see Neil Roberts, ‘Poetic Subjects’, in *British poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Arts*, ed. by Gary Day and Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp.56-62; David Whitley provides a more sceptical analysis of Reading’s Swiftian accents in ‘Peter Reading: The Katistokrat’, *Poetry Review*, 88.2 (1998), 64-66.

⁴⁹ Tony Harrison, *Under the Clock: New Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005).

Tony Harrison's role is worth foregrounding in so far as, along with Peter Reading, he has been regarded as the spokesman of left-wing antagonism since the eighties. This notion implies that Harrison's poetry bodies forth the contradictions of his generation more than any contemporary.⁵⁰ Significantly enough, this anti-conservative poet has resonantly hardened his firm anti-government stand since New Labour came to power; he is the middle-class poet of working class ascent whose work, reviving the genre of classical invective, most evidently leads the reader from the seventies and eighties oblique opposition up to the 'protest' climate of the nineties and noughts.

Harrison's *Under the Clock* is relevant to an increasingly intergenerational debate on the burning issue of global wars;⁵¹ the collection is also in many respects indicative of some less apparent shifts in the handling of historical memory and the endorsement of political stances. In the initial section especially, a shocking imagery translates Harrison's critique of the 'exportation of democracy' pursued by the West, and by the Anglo-American coalition: '“decapitation” to win minds and hearts,/ a bombing bruited surgical, humane, 's/ only partially successful when its start 's / a small child's shrapnelled scooped of its brains' ('The Krieg Anthology', *Under the Clock* 1-2). In order to debunk the eschatological connotations of political jargon (Orwellian 'euphemisms' such as 'operation freedom'),⁵² no journalistic obliqueness is employed to dissimulate war. As in Pinter, the poems construct the reader as their addressee. The speaker is Tony Harrison, watching Iraq 'through' the humdrum stream of TV breaking-news. Though caught up in the present events, the poet soon moves on to look back at the past; the focus shifts from 'distant' Iraq to a closer theatre of war, as he unearths memories of the Second World War after 'fifty or so odd years of so-called peace' in 'Queuing for Charon':

Even in Greek sun the ghosts
come back to haunt the boy.
underneath the skin that's tanned
these Krauts are frail and ill

⁵⁰ See Roberts, *Narrative and Voice*, pp. 135-136.

⁵¹ See Angela Leighton, 'The Cock of Baghdad', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 June 2007.

⁵² Western war slogans during the Iraq war were not, however, unprecedented in their Orwellian resonance; the very first *newspeak* formulation in recent times dates back to the 1989 invasion of Panama, aptly called 'Operation Just Cause'.

But once they served the Fatherland
 with more than time to kill.
 of an age to have yelled *Zieg Heils*
 worn jackboots, marched like geese,
 they stagger round with vacant smiles
 smeared with anti-UV grease.
 A few years younger I'd only seen
 Belsen on newsreel but the sight
 I saw at eight on that big screen
 fell on me like a blight (*Under the Clock 23*)

Here the tone hovers uneasily between intimate reflection and the stereotyped evocation of Nazism triggered off by a casual trip to Crete. Its instability is enhanced by a disturbing anti-German lingo which dates back to the war years but bears rather cogently on imaginings emerged soon after the German reunification, such as the latent Third-Reich-dream ominously contemplated in British alternate histories since the late seventies.⁵³ Harrison's vocal posturing here betrays the pervasive unbalance detected by Anne Whitehead in her discussion on Harrison as a 'protest poet' resuming Wilfred Owen's legacy:

Harrison continues to question the role of poetry in the context of modern warfare [...] he forges a post-Holocaust poetics which is characterised by awkwardness and embarrassment, and insists that it is better to confront the horrors of war from a distance rather than to remain silent.⁵⁴

Whereas such embarrassment has been identified as a hallmark of British post-Holocaust poetry,⁵⁵ works which will be considered in this survey show how punctually a poet such as Tony Harrison can hit a raw nerve with readers – questioning current negotiations with historical memory or even anticipating them. Here, however, his tone hardly reminds his readers of the

⁵³ For a specific focus on the handling of the Nazist-fascist imagery in pre and post-wall fiction, with a specific reference to work of Les Deighton, Robert Harris and John Bowen, see Harald Husemann 'If Adolf had come; if Helmut were to come', in *The Novel in Anglo-German Context: Cultural cross-currents and affinities*, ed. by Susanne Stark (Amsterdam: Atlanta, 2000), pp. 408-412.

⁵⁴ Anne Whitehead, 'The Gulf War and the Poetry of Protest', *Textual Practice* 19.2 (2005), 349-372, pp.355-6.

⁵⁵ For a reflection on the uncertainties of tone and address, and on the problem of 'representation' in British post-Holocaust poetry, see Claire Taylee, 'Songs of Experience: British Post-Holocaust Poetry', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Kendall, pp. 592-612. This particular aspect of Tony Harrison's poetry is discussed, with references to the work of Geoffrey Hill, etc. in Anthony Rowland's study, to which we will refer in chapter three.

careful handling of ambiguity that has been the leading thread of his work. If ‘The Krieg Anthology’ and ‘Queuing for Charon’ do not fail to shock in their direct engagement with both history and politics, they betray an uncompromising moral assuredness which is quite unprecedented in this poet. The very effectiveness of Harrison’s strategy might therefore be questioned: its aggressive groundtone and its politically incorrect innuendos risk, in fact, to debunk the implicit connection between British and European involvement in the Iraq war and its all too recent past, the Second World War.

Under the Clock ultimately signals a move away from the obliqueness and dramatic articulation of past ‘war pieces’ – notably the ‘Gulf War poems’ which *The Guardian* commissioned him in 1991⁵⁶ – but, most importantly, from the moral overtones of his late eighties and early nineties writing, where ‘information’ was weighed against a kind of ambivalent historical imagination. The cluster of visual obscenity in the Gulf War poems highlights the relation between war journalism and media manipulation⁵⁷ in such a way as to foreshadow Harrison’s later ‘protest’ (in particular, through an important explicit reminder of the Falklands experience in the first poem). But Harrison’s dramatic approach and his Orwellian concern with the ‘enemy of war’ reach back to a quite different moral register. A comparison with the oft-quoted sequence ‘Sonnets for August 1945’, originally published in his late seventies collection *From the School of Eloquence*, might measure the distance. The sonnets are pervaded by the obsessive memory of VE and VJ days in Leeds, poignantly framed by the ghastly evocation of the late-seventies depressed North:

that, now clouded, sense of public joy
with war-torn adults wild in their loud fling
has never come again since as a boy
I saw Leeds people dance and heard them sing.
There’s still the dark, scorched circle on the road.

⁵⁶ Tony Harrison, ‘Initial Illumination’ and ‘A Cold Coming’, in *A Cold Coming: Gulf War Poems* (Manchester: Bloodaxe, 1991). Both poems revolve around symbol images of the Gulf War – the dying oil-crested cormorant and the charred Iraqi soldier which was the victim not just of war but of mediatic obscuration. The latter poem stages a ghastly dialogue between the poet journalist and the revenant soldier, which turns its black humour and moral implications to surreal effect while rejecting any easy self-positioning on the part of the poet’s *persona*.

⁵⁷ For a perceptive analysis of Harrison’s war reportage from the Eastern front, its possible relation to media politics and to its prospective anticipation of Baudrillard’s critique of the techno-war in Iraq, see Whitehead, ‘Gulf War’, pp. 349-54.

The morning after kids like me helped spray
 hissing upholstery spring wire that still glowed
 and cobbles boiling with black gas tar for VJ.⁵⁸

The dismay at the growing social conflict and at the human waste brought about by industrial advancement which can be felt in the collection ('Working', 'History Classes', 'The Rhubarbarians') is here juxtaposed to the memory of a differently destructive outcome of 'progress', which the dominant post-war narrative had conveniently dimmed. Similarly, in his mid-eighties groundbreaking poem 'V' the ghost of a creeping civil war pervades the vision of the class-ridden conflict in Northern England; the debris of British society – Ken Smith's 'disaster zone' – hints therefore at a broader political failure, that is mockingly juxtaposed to the ambiguous premises of post-war moral and material reconstruction (the antagonistic 'versus' of the poem turns into the Churchillian 'victory' sign).

Despite being one of the most controversial pieces of the eighties, 'V' shows how in a period characterised by internal and external conflict, Harrison's political critique was fierce but mediated. Pushing to the extreme the dichotomic rhetoric of those years only to debunk it at the very end, Harrison lifted up a veil on the compromises Western democracy had obscured on the verge of its post-war victory and which the Cold War pattern soon helped to submerge. Harrison's goal was to strike a chord on the individual and collective memory of his nation, exploiting the political potential of class conflict when the tension raised by the miners' strike was still high-pitched and social conflict was 'carefully presented by the tabloid press as an unpleasant reminder of trade unionism's power to hold the country to ransom, and fought by Thatcher as a virtual re-run of the Falklands conflict.'⁵⁹ Condemning the Western 'botched' civilization, Harrison was, at this stage, already lending ethic depth to the investigation of history and socio-political consciousness.

⁵⁸ Tony Harrison, 'The morning after, I' in *Collected Poems* (London: Viking, 2007), p. 196. All further references are abbreviated to *CP* and are to this edition. The sequence 'Sonnets for August 1945' was first published in Harrison's second full-length collection *From the School of Eloquence* (London: Rex Collings, 1978).

⁵⁹ John Bull, *Stage Right*, p.12.

The indirectness of his approach is symptomatic of the often remarked refrain from overt commitment in the Thatcher era. Looking back at the eighties and early nineties with the hindsight of later developments, what strikes most is on the one hand, how the utter instability of internal and external socio-political contexts drove poetry, and its languages, into paths that tunnelled in and out of the specific situation of British society; on the other hand, how this sharpened a sense of the chasm between poetry as political agency and poetry as social observation rooted in the legacy of the seventies.⁶⁰ The recent radicalism might be a thought-provoking response to such ‘standstill’; it nonetheless explores some areas of the potential dissent which loomed as ‘V’ itself came to represent a case in the midst of the Thatcher era,⁶¹ raising doubts on the government’s hard line on censorship and on the broader instrumentalization of broadcasting (a theme exploited that year by Howard Brenton and David Hare’s *Pravda*).

Harrison’s pre-‘protest’ works deployed the moral ambiguities ushered in the dramatized distance between himself and his *personae*, an aspect which the poets of the eighties share, and which seems the clearest expression of the socio-cultural divisions springing from their post-war background. If that moral edge became less blunted in the poetry inspired by current conflicts, the transition was not so swift, as shown by much verse inspired by two ‘interzonal’ conflicts: the Balkan Crisis and the first Gulf War. In the case of Harrison, the Bosnian and Gulf War pieces are those which best express the contradiction between his willingness to represent war, thus challenging the mystifications inherent in the media coverage that attended both conflicts, and the implicit recognition of his distance from the experience of war, both as a poet and as a journalist.⁶² Distance is ostensibly realised through the simplifying tone and the grotesque scenes

⁶⁰ P.R.King, *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1979), p.221.

⁶¹ The BBC produced film/poem *V* was actually rejected by the Censorship Board because of its large use of four-letter words. Charges of obscenity however sprawled after its final broadcasting, raising a furore amongst literary and cinematic critics. The revised edition of *V* is followed by a selection of the major contributions to the debate in newspapers and reviews. *The Blasphemer Banquet*, which tackled the issue of the Rushdie affair, was also transferred on television format and broadcast by BBC. See Tony Harrison ‘The Blasphemer Banquet’, in *Tony Harrison: Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies*, pp.395-406.

⁶² The role of media and war journalism, in relation to such global conflicts as the Gulf War and the Balkans conflict and their place within a wider historical context is explored by Peter Young and Peter Jesser in *The Media and the*

which permeate the first of ‘Three Poems for Bosnia,’ written in the aftermath of the 1995 Sarajevo and Donij Vakuf sieges:

This time it’s the Bosnian Muslims’ turn
to ‘cleanse’ a taken town, to loot, and burn.
Donij Vakuf fell last night at 11.
Victory’s signalled by firing rounds to Heaven
and for the god to whom their victory’s owed.
We see the victors cycling down the road
on bikes that they’re too big for [...]

but one, whose knees keep bumping on his chin,
rides a kid’s cycle, with a mandolin,
also childish size, strapped to the saddle (*CP* 337)

The poet’s detachment is even sharper when ‘reportage’ is set in the middle of a war zone, as happens in the second of his ‘Gulf War’ poems. More than the Yugoslavian conflict, the Gulf War brings back a notion of enmity which owes much to the Cold War Manichean oppositions, replaced and complicated by a new ‘us vs. them’ confrontation. But the disquietingly ‘virtual’ presence of the war permeates the poems, where any involvement appears almost impossible – a realisation which further pricks the poet’s implicit self-criticism. In ‘A Cold Coming’ (*CP* 313-20) for example, the grotesque, surreal atmosphere of a post-mortem interview with the Iraqi soldier (whose ‘fame’ rests on brutal media exposure) is enhanced by the tongue-in-cheek irony of the last lines, where the poet-interviewer is baffled in his attempt to memorialise the meeting: ‘that’s your job, poet, to pretend/I want my foe to be my friend’ (*CP* 319). Besides, the caricatural connotations of both interviewer and soldier (as in ‘V’ those of the middle-class poet and the hooligan) enhance the dramatic and non-realistic approach which Harrison turns to critical effect.

Military: From Crimea to Desert strike (London, Macmillan, 1998). Directly involved in the Gulf War reportage, the authors tackle the issue of the effective power, and gradual empowerment, of the media in the age of smart technology and of a rather unbalanced relation between international political agendas and the audiences’ real possibility to be informed over conflicts. From the vantage point of ‘insiders’, the book provides an investigation of the debates which centred on the Western misrepresentation and manipulated reportage at the time of the nineties’ conflict, thus highlighting a notion of invisibility that would anticipate the debates on the second conflict in Iraq.

As a member of the generation which grew up during the Cold War and fed on television and popular culture, Harrison is extremely responsive to the filtered representation of the enemies of war. The ultimately unknown identity of such enemies, represented through stereotypes and overtly ventriloquized, shows the ‘Cold War’ projective notion of the enemy leaking into the post-war logic of a “diffuse enemy”, whose face is more indicative of its opponent’s fears than of its own history or culture. At this stage then, Harrison seems to articulate that sense of ideological continuity which is also poignantly stressed by Martha Nussbaum and Abbott Gleason in their recent re-assessment of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2005) and of its relevance to Western current politics and worldview:

[After the Cold War] the world continued to change even more radically. From the post-Cold War time of 1999 we have now moved abruptly, post 9/11, into what appears to be a very different era. The remnants of Cold early days of the Bush administration (Russia is still our enemy, freedom is under siege from totalitarianism) have now quite suddenly been replaced by a sharply divergent image of the world, in which the enemy is not an all-powerful state but terrorists, who elude location and identification [...] We always knew, or at least could vaguely imagine, what the end of the Cold War would look like – one side would win, and that side’s economic and political system would be imposed on the other. But it seems now impossible to imagine what the end of this “new war” would look like [...] The sense of emergency is retained from the Cold War and has simply been reconfigured to fit the new world situation in which the enemy is not single but diffuse. And, in a most Orwellian fashion, the sense of emergency is used to underwrite measures in the areas of constitutional law and civil liberty that might otherwise look questionable.⁶³

Harrison’s poetry in the eighties and nineties stages such devious identifications and expresses the uncertainty of the poet before a kind of experience – his meeting with the enemy, war itself – which seems to be out of his/her reach. It basically urges an awareness of this gap, and warns its audience against possible misleading perceptions by exposing the limits of his strikingly visual grasp of historical events.

Such attitude was dropped over recent years, a fact indicative of further implications of Nussbaum’s and Gleason’s insight into contemporary imagination to which mainstream verse

⁶³ Gleason and Nussbaum, ‘Introduction’ to *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp.1-10, pp 2-3.

clearly responded.⁶⁴ The positive warning against misrepresentation actually reveals a more troubling fear lest a serious understanding of the experience of the ‘Other’ may be attempted. Such attitude can hardly be regarded as progressive, as it is enhanced by the tendency towards self-reflexivity implicit in some strains of current philosophical and aesthetic postmodernism.⁶⁵ In recent war poems – whether dealing with the Iraq or the Palestinian conflict – verbal iconoclasm and obscenity reveal an attempt to fight the off-stage side of global conflicts rather than an effort to know what or who might be on ‘the other side’. Stereotyped, ventriloquized as happens in Harrison, or removed, as happens in James Fenton’s *Out of Danger*,⁶⁶ the ‘Other’ is totally faceless. It is often the conscious creation of the writer, supported by a popular and mediatic culture that is the primary target of criticism.

The tonal and postural attitude endorsed by recent war poetry – by a speaker assuming the backing of an imagined, ideologically supportive tuned-in community, an ‘us’ clearly separable from ‘them’⁶⁷ – does not just point to the wider implications of an opposition that forcibly redefines the ‘West’ against a quite uninvestigated ‘Other’ (for example, the ‘Muslim world’, the distant victims of wars often provoked by an increasingly Americanized West etc.). It is also largely indicative of the moral disambiguation which, despite a detected structural continuity, measures the distance of today’s European reality from the Cold War opposition. Though encompassing a wide range of civil and political questions, recent protest poetry seems deprived of the very ambivalence which strengthened the poetry concerned with the former Eastern Europe.

⁶⁴ The confrontation between post-war and Cold-War representations of socio-political patterns spread across the Western world has been central to recent developments in European sociological studies: see, for example, Ulrich Beck, *Democracies without Enemies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

⁶⁵ See Wheatley, ‘Dichtung und Wahrheit’, pp. 653-666.

⁶⁶ James Fenton, *Out of Danger* (London: Penguin, 1993).

⁶⁷ In their assessment of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century British poetry, both Sean O’Brien and John Redmond draw attention to the growing tendency to assume an imagined community (held together by either political orientation or broad social identification) as the involved addressee of poems, whom the speaker typically includes through the use of collective pronouns, ‘we’ or ‘you’. Political verse often fits into this trend, assuming the reader in the use of a first person plural ideally sharing the ideological and cultural positioning on which, as happens in Harold Pinter’s poems, the poem passes its judgement. See O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, pp. 207-50 and John Redmond, ‘Lyric Adaptations’ in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century English Poetry*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 245-258.

In the shift from a pre- to a post-wall world, poetry addressed in fact the emergence of a long unknown European ‘Other’ in such a way as to undermine the seeming contrast between the relative quietism of the eighties and the radicalism of the turn of the late twentieth-century British poetic scene. As compared to their attitude to later, culturally removed ‘others’, poets appear more cautious in discovering the former ‘enemy’. They are, above all, loath to adopt a straightforward political language or to criticise it. The opacity of the ‘Wild East’ to Western eyes which is regarded a main feature of the post-Wall perspective in the novel, is either internalised or tactfully underscored.⁶⁸ In the wide range of voices offered by Fenton, Harrison, Szirtes and Smith, the speaker might be eclipsed, a voice over, a self-questioning witness or part of a choral subject: the poet’s ‘representative’ cultural stance is never foregrounded. Such involvement seems provoked by a likewise deliberate effort not to frame the ‘Other’ in any sheerly dichotomic view. A kind of self-recognition on the part of ‘us’ is implicitly, crucial to the projective dynamics underlying the representation of ‘them’.

I.2 Grating expectations: dystopic meta-narratives and the return of the repressed

For all the perspectival variety offered by poets, British poetry seemed actually to go East in order to shed light on a story not immediately detachable from Western Europe. According to Houswitschka and Hallberg, the British perspective on post-wall Europe was quite limited:

landscapes are structured by the fixation of time and the traces that times leave behind in these images [...] This focus on images of space and history rather than the analysis of contemporary social and political issues is typical of a British perspective on post-wall Europe which is determined less by an original interest in Europe than by a concern with the ‘Wild East’ as the other that helps to define one’s own identity.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ On the opacity of Eastern Europe in literature relating to the East/West divide, see Ludmilla Kostova ‘Theorizing the “Wild East”’, *The European Messenger*, X:1 (2001), 70-73 and Lidia Vianu, *The Desperado Age: British Literature at the turn of the Third Millenium* (Bucharest: Bucharest Univesity Press, 2007), pp. 44-61.

⁶⁹ Houswitschka and Hallberg, *Literary Views*, p. 90.

The poetry that set out to discover Central and Eastern Europe recognised a shared ground and removed memories reaching back to the pre-Cold War past. Typically, the war and post-war years were a crucial key to the attitude towards the former ‘Eastern Other’ endorsed by Harrison, Fenton, Szirtes and Smith. In those years, East and West were most clearly framed as two modulations of a common, ‘progressive’ ratio that in Zygmunt Bauman’s view, spelt out the twentieth century and its ambivalence.⁷⁰ At the end of the Wall age, the failure of the Eastern side of European modernity elicited British poets’ willingness to document what stories, what losses and conflicts that parallel project left behind, rather than eliciting a reflection on its socio-political outcome. Joining in the attempt ‘to define one’s own identity’, British poetry offered an original perspective on the European ‘Other’, thus counterbalancing both the promoted cultural-political isolation of the Thatcher age and a growing, broader but misleading notion of the West as successfully striving towards its goals of democratization and material progress.

The typical register through which the former Eastern Europe was represented was ostensibly non-political. Though chiming with the overall gist of British post-wall literature, the non-political choice was above all relevant to the role played by the mainstream poets of the eighties, and to their sharp awareness of the slippage between their intellectual grasp of reality and their traditional loyalties and attachments. The divisiveness inherent to the eighties mood was merged with a keen sense of historical pessimism: for most poets, it drew upon the recognition that their

⁷⁰ In Bauman’s view, the essential landmark of post-modernity is a detachment or disenchantment with the modern, ‘progressive’ episteme that reached back to European Enlightenment. A model of order, supported by the opposite ideologies which converged on the two main trends (or, in Bauman’s reading of Lyotard, ‘grand narratives’) of liberalism and socialism, would define such modernity in contrast to both the *Ancien Régime* worldview and the disenchanted post-modern age. The current disenchantment with ‘progressive’ grand narratives would not, however, imply a neat departure from them but a constant questioning of their inevitable relation with the present world, as it tends to a ‘global’ extension of Western liberal democracy. The technological system that connects such a world, the new division of labour, the technocratic administration that attends it, the deliberate creation of extra-jurisdictional areas aimed at disempowering determinate sections of our society are but some of the aspects of today’s world which are strictly related to the ‘past’ modernity. The role historical awareness plays in such a reading is paramount. Ambivalence might, according to Bauman, be best detected when considering such aspects in relation to the experiences of national-socialism and communism – which Bauman regards as possible accomplishments of, rather than deviations from, the progressive ‘model’ of modernity. Partly shadowed by the rigid dichotomies of the Cold War, the ambivalent connection between the current liberal-democratic practice and the various declinations of non-liberal models, including those inspired by a socialist ideology, would be clearly emerging in the post-Wall world. (Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Oxford: Polity, 1991).

access to a poetic voice was part of a historical and social process that would push their outsiderism even further.⁷¹ The elegiac groundtone which was stalking through the works of the English post-war generation, as through the ‘other’ great current of the eighties mainstream – the Irish line led by Seamus Heaney – was also the defining note of their antagonism. Significantly, their political ineffectiveness was turned to political effect: the political impact of the generation of the eighties lay in their recognition of the historical silencing of social groups, of peoples and individuals: Harrison’s oft-quoted line, ‘The dumb go down in history and disappear’ (‘National Trust’, *CP*, 131) voices a realisation which he, like his fellow poets, tried to resist.

Backed by such anxious relation to history, British poets shared a concern with the tongue-tied European ‘Other’; they lay a specific claim on memory. As Harrison maintains, ‘[they were] faced with a very real idea of extinction, not only of personal extinction but of the work and of memory’.⁷² Despite Blake Morrison’s claim that poetry in the eighties would ‘reassert the primacy of the imagination...having come to see the imagination not, as did the previous generation, as part of the dark force of modern history (Hitler, Hiroshima, the Nazi and Soviet

⁷¹ ‘Working class’ and Irish poetry represent the two most visible strains where cultural divisions were faced and made visible as both strains accessed the mainstream of British poetry in the eighties; the kind of political strategies endorsed in these strains have typically been associated and set apart from the committed stance endorsed by other major strains in the same period, notably women’s poetry and immigrant poetry. On the contradictory features of ‘working class’ poetry, see Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940*, pp.183-92. A focus on the dramatic ‘divisiveness’ of the outstanding spokesman of the Irish school, Seamus Heaney, can be found in surveys which consider his mid-eighties/nineties output (from *Station Island* to *Seeing Things*, passing through the elegiac middle section of *The Haw Lantern*), such as *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney; A Critical Study*, ed. by Bernard O’Donoghue (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) and *Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Elmer Andrews (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998). An important representative of the eighties socio-political and regional divisions, Douglas Dunn, pointed out very sharply the contradiction inherent in the work of poets whose very access to the mainstream implied their conscious detachment from regional, class and in the case of second generation immigrants, national loyalties: ‘they share a perception of how their voices are not those of the proprietorial language of the literature to which they have devoted themselves’ (‘Formal Strategies in Harrison’s Poetry’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp.129-132, p.129). In contrast with the then very radical stance endorsed by, for example, Black British writing, this contradiction resulted into a partial appropriation of such proprietorial language – as suggested by Tony Harrison’s provoking yet ‘formal’ request to ‘occupy the lousy leasehold [mainstream] poetry’ (‘Them and Us’). Though this very consciousness blunted their political radicalism, their critical attitude towards the national, uniformly ‘middle class’ and insular character of official culture in the Thatcher years set these poets radically apart from the New Generation poets (Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Glyn Maxwell amongst other) which emerged between the late eighties and nineties and whose political potential appeared extremely low-keyed from the outset (see O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, pp. 89-96 and 241-260).

⁷² John Haffenden, ‘An Interview with Tony Harrison’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 227-246, p.235.

camps) but as a potential source of tenderness and renewal,⁷³ most poets cast a searching light precisely on the twentieth century history they had survived, and appeared as questioning when facing up to the ‘beyond the curtain’.

By 1990, the moral ambivalence Harrison had framed in that shocking memory of ‘joy banked with grief’ early in 1945, was reconfigured as a wider sense of non-reconciliation with history itself, a dissociation from which his poetry sprang:

Whatever dark and pessimistic [is] the content of the poetry, the act of confronting it with a poem is itself a denial of the pessimistic beginning. If I had to divide the heart and the head, I would say that my head faces human history, and has a very bleak and pessimistic view of the possibilities for mankind.⁷⁴

As happens with the early Fenton and Smith, Harrison’s wanderings across Europe eventually testified to no less disparaging worldviews. George Szirtes likewise framed the feeling shared by the poets of the post-war generation. Recognising W.H.Auden, Joseph Brodsky and James Fenton as kindred poetic souls, he actually situated the moral and intellectual pulse of their and his poetry within the unresolved scenario of recent history:

They understood darkness and could counter it with wit. They were also Europeans and I am, I think, above all, a European. All that is good and all that is evil reside for me in the heart of Europe. Intellectually, I understand that there may be greater saintliness or greater viciousness in Africa or South America, but none of that strikes as close to my heart as Europe.⁷⁵

Curiously at odds with the humble approach to history Szirtes generally displays, such hypostatization sounds both as a resistance to and a confirmation of the moral horizon that had informed his and their post-war education.

It is not surprising then that writers should, well after 1989, keep turning back to the post-war age and to the moral ambivalence which had been ‘frozen’ beneath the Cold War worldview, as Harrison does in his notebook. The adoption of a thoroughly ethic register to define their view of

⁷³ Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison, ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.12.

⁷⁴ Haffenden, ‘An Interview with T.H.’, p. 227.

⁷⁵ Lidia Vianu, ‘Interview with George Szirtes’ *Desperado Literature* online, available at <<http://www.e-scoala.ro/lidiavianu/poets.GeorgeSzirtes.html>> [5 October 2007].

history was part of a shared attitude to deny the very rationale of war. They attempted to demystify the political dissimulation that attended the ‘cold’ aftermath of war, when the former enemy, morally defeated, was substituted by the former ally – in a sort of continuous war envisaged by George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Any attempt to hide conflict beneath ideological blankets was actually dismissed by a generation aware of falsifications, and refraining from an insistence on the ‘Eastern drift’ often supported by Western discourse.

This retrenchment from ideology and politics became most evident just when conflicts in the post-Wall East threatened to shake Western moral confidence. Discussing the importance of engagement in the transitional period of the early nineties, both Ken Smith and George Szirtes drew attention to the peculiar sense of continuity between the Cold War age and the post-wall years.⁷⁶ At that time, Ken Smith spoke as a long-time, though admittedly ‘detached’, witness to the Balkan crisis which followed the collapse of the Eastern bloc; George Szirtes spoke with the hindsight of his thirty-year-long exile from his native Hungary. Strongly critical of peace-processes and of the prospective modernization/Westernisation of the East, both poets stressed the relevance of past and present conflicts (the Second World War and Nazism, communism, the Hungarian uprising, the post-1989 Yugoslavian crisis) to the literate consciousness. Confronted with the perspective of new wars, Szirtes and Smith urged a European, rather than more generally ‘international’, reconfiguration of that sense of the ‘pity of war’ which seemed to become a leading principle in the discussion over war poetry.⁷⁷ More than ever, the issue of war ushered in a more general discussion on poetry and on its potential in bearing witness to conflicts when involved in epoch-making turns.

Such an approach to contemporary and past history stimulated some decentring strains of literary criticism which were developed until the late nineties. In 1998, Peter Forbes proposed an enthusiastic reading of Bertolt Brecht’s *War Primer*,⁷⁸ successfully translated into English for the first time. Interestingly, Brecht’s wartime satirical poetry and its friction between language and

⁷⁶ Ken Smith and George Szirtes, ‘Poets out of Place’, *Poetry Review* 93:4 (1993), 56-7.

⁷⁷ In Andrew Motion’s afterword to the collection *101 Poets against the War* (pp. 135-7), the First World War poets Wilfred Owen, and more indirectly Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg are regarded as the indispensable points of reference for the ‘new’ strain of British war poetry.

⁷⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, trans. and ed. by John Willet (London: Libris, 1998).

photography (all through the collection, Brecht pastes and comments newspaper scraps) reminds Forbes of the biting thrust in Harrison's war poems, and of the latter's sharp sense of the 'pity of war'. Unlike Brecht, Harrison bears no direct witness to war: the identification with the enemy testifies to the basic perception of shared humanity no less than to the poet's acknowledged ignorance of the enemy himself. Yet Forbes detects a basic similarity between the two writers when suggesting, about *War Primer*:

Victims and perpetrators are featured equally, often to the tune that beyond the local circumstances of their tragedy, they are all victims of something greater. The overall impression the book leaves is of the medieval squalor to which Europe reduced itself so recently. And yet European politicians still wring their hands at atrocities being committed now 'within three hours of London', as if "European" were an agreed synonym for "civilised".⁷⁹

His focus being on the German poet, Forbes does not develop the hint any further; nor does he stress to what extent Harrison's dramatic approach leads him quite beyond the scope of Brecht's analytical bent. Still, Forbes clearly voiced the expectations of an increasingly politicized critical trend concerned with the most recurrent impasses in the British literary and intellectual panorama. The note of reservation struck by his final comment resumed an ongoing debate on the necessary brutality poetry had to face since Auschwitz, which around the end of the century was to be displaced outside the European orbit. Harrison's engagement with the Balkans responded to the reintroduction of that area within the civilized European landscape; his urgency to witness the aftermath of war hammered home no comforting lesson about the European civilization. His sympathetic approach to the undemocratic realities unleashed by 1989 in the Southern European region pointed to the persisting crisis after the eclipse of communist East and the ideological and moral disruption spreading across Western Europe.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Peter Forbes, 'Insolent Rhymes', *Poetry Review* 88:2 (1998), 12.

⁸⁰ Addressing the left-liberal debate on post-1989 ideological disillusion, and dismissing rising fears about a *Nineteen Eighty-Four*-modelled West as misleading, Sinfield's analysis of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher years underscores unresolved doubts on the ethic grounding of Western liberal democracies: 'Welfare capitalism raised expectations, with a view to governing through popular consent rather than through threats of deprivation and coercion [...] that is the failure that perplexed us, not the failure of Soviet-style centralised direction.' (Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. xxx).

At the time of the 1989 events, and even more markedly after the European conflict in former Yugoslavia, the fading of a ‘universally humanistic ideal’ fostered by European and British post-war culture still weighed heavily on British consciousness. Its negative counterpart, rooted in the shadows of the last conflict, had finally surfaced. In a striking piece of commentary on Goya’s ‘Chamber of Horrors’, George Szirtes could thus condense the harsh lesson of the Second World War, playing on a disturbing register not very far from Brecht’s:

The enemy about my waist
tears my children in his haste,
Lord preserve me live and chaste
fear has a sweet and bitter taste.
They hung my arm upon the tree
my testicles were fed to me
before I perished. They were men.
I would do the same to them.⁸¹

One of the interesting implications of British poetry concerned with Eastern Europe shortly before 1989 and in the nineties springs from its potential non-alignment and its subversion of the imaginative realm on which the West/East divide had pivoted for decades. A less obvious representation of the East came to complicate the predictable opposition between the stagnant East on the verge of collapse and the horizon of Western liberal democracies. Well-rooted into fears about Western ‘besieged freedom’, the emerging notion of the East overlapped with prospective as well as retrospective tensions whereby British poets engaged with historical revisions that reached back to the Second World War and the post-war years, and foregrounded possible points of convergence between the East and the West. Against a largely dystopic scenario, British poetry opened to a fruitful dialogue with the historical perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe that started then to be negotiated.

With the only exception of James Fenton, who arrived in Germany in the early eighties after a long journey across the hot spots of the Cold War on the South-Asian front, it was between the mid-eighties and the late nineties that British poetry discovered a whole section of the former

⁸¹ George Szirtes, ‘Goya’s Chamber of Horrors. Yo lo Vi – Two Voices’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 March 1985, p. 23.

Eastern bloc: a quite varied landscape, stretching from Eastern Germany, to the Czech and the Slovak republics, to Hungary, Poland and some regions on the border of the former Soviet empire (the sub-Carpathian regions, the Ukraine), was slowly mapped out between 1985 and 2000. The most distinctive trait of this peculiar poetic mapping is probably its resistance to foreground the historical experience of communism in the countries it covered. As Lidia Vianu suggests, ‘a failure to take in communist realities [...] dislocation, estrangement and alienation’⁸² on the part of the Western and British writers was a feature of Cold War fiction that was not dropped in the post-Wall period. Such resistance was even more marked in the post-Wall poetry. With some possible exceptions which will be considered, the absence of ‘the Other’ by definition, Russia and Russian-speaking countries, is highly telling. In the case of poetry – especially of the poetry of the eighties – this non-alignment is worth remarking, as it was strengthened by a firm rejection of any ideological appropriation of the East used to support political discourse in the West.⁸³

Amongst the most visible expressions of dissent in the eighties and in the aftermath of Thatcherism was the *Nineteen Eighty-Four*-like dystopia associated with the rising statalism of the otherwise ‘neo-liberal’ system. An oblique, yet telling, signal of the socio-cultural pessimism which has been affecting political poetry since the eighties was the ubiquitous ‘sovietisation’ of British social scenarios. A lasting legacy derives from the specific climate of the Thatcher years, where one of the rising tropes of the ‘State of the Nation’ poetry, famously dubbed by Tom Paulin ‘Junk Britain verse’,⁸⁴ was the clear-cut opposition between an oppressive yet deviant

⁸² Vianu, *Desperado Age*, p.55

⁸³ Even in the theatre, the shift from pre-1989 to post-1989 is rather telling: where Brenton’s *Pravda* hinted at the totalitarian control of information in the West through a subtextual comparison to Eastern communism, Brenton would eventually, together with Tariq Ali, offer one of the few post-Wall plays on the decay of the Soviet apparatus (*Moscow Gold*, 1990) mainly focusing on Russian politics yet hardly delving into the delicate, wider context of the 1985-90 transition.

⁸⁴ Tom Paulin, *Minotaur: Politics and the Nation State* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 291. In Paulin, the formula refers to the poetry of Peter Reading, and in particular his mid-eighties collection *Ukulele Music* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985); the term has been later extended to the social canvasses of Thatcherite Britain sketched by dissenting writers of Szirtes and Reading’s generation (Sean O’Brien, John Witworth etc.). ‘Junk’ and alternative, rooted in the oppositional movement of the small presses, is another poet, Ken Edwards, and in particular his collection *Drumming & Poems* (Gallop Dog Press, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1982) which photographs the early years of Thatcher’s rule and in its central section, the turmoil following the National Front

state and a social texture verging on sheer anomy. A significant, however misleading, identification between the former and the oppression of totalitarian regimes loomed large, in poets such as Peter Reading and more explicitly in the younger Michael Hofmann.⁸⁵

By no coincidence, the poets who ventured into the former Eastern bloc in the eighties and nineties hardly subscribed this kind of ‘Orwellian’ reading, which proved rather poor in historical and socio-political perception.⁸⁶ But, as Smith’s poem ‘Passing Through’ suggests, their gaze eastwards was not informed by a confident belonging to the ‘side’ that had won the ‘conflict’, either. Though their poetry bore the brunt of the difficult Thatcher decade and of its legacy, they found alternative ways of articulating the widespread sense of uprootedness and oppression, especially in relation to their deeply felt concern with the public and the political.

The problem of a rising ‘privatisation of experience’ and the growing feeling of helplessness on the part of the individual was foregrounded in Western terms. Any possible association between East and West was especially downplayed by poets who, like George Szirtes, had some first-hand experience of the pre-Wall East and could draw some parallel between the different ways the private sphere and the public sphere were severed. Though hardly political, his portrait of British society in the mid-eighties touches on a subtle connection between politics in Western and Eastern society. In the middle section of his collection *A British Apocalypse*, for example, the impossibility of his speaker’s private protest to become public is ironically translated by his request to be spied on the phone. In ‘History’, the speaker claims:

agitation and the passage through Parliament of the Nationality Bill in 1980-1. Shared themes of the ‘Junk Verse’ are the widening gap between the ‘new’ middle classes and the growing underclass of the unemployed and the former working class, and the creeping, subterranean contradiction between the increasing sense of socio-political oppression the latter voice and the liberal climate of Thatcherite society.

⁸⁵ In *Nights in the Iron Hotel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983) the Anglo-German poet Hofmann (b. 1957) draws a parallel between the devious relation between private and public life in the West (with its mixture of alienation and morbid absorption and observation of ‘other lives’) and the dissimulation required by controlled social life in the East (the title poem is set in Prague). See also his ‘dystopic’ reading of Western and Eastern Germany (‘Going East’) in *Acrimony* (1986). On the association between the sociological analysis of the ‘West’ in the poetry of the mid-eighties and the appropriation of Eastern-derived totalitarian imagination, see Alan Robinson’s essay on Michael Hofmann in *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 48-62.

⁸⁶ See Ulrich Beck’s focus on the political and historical distance between Orwell’s dystopia in 1984 and the possible actualization of dystopic aspects in the ‘society of spectacle’ in *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 133-7.

I speak as a witness,
 a napalm-scented ghost with a gift of flames
 who even now can reel off sacred names,
 the kind that glowed and terrified us witless.
 I am an old soldier of the last empire, sold
 into captivity by what then seemed eternal:
 Brezhnev's beetling eyebrows, the sloping nose
 of Tricky Dicky, bricks of South African gold...

True, there were consolations when we held hands
 or went driving, our hands in each other's laps,
 but the car died like the other death-traps
 and oil was creeping up deserted seaside sands.
 People were blowing us up. The prime minister's lawn
 was crowded with tanks...
 I want a voice to speak this, twenty nine
 years of it, in a voice that is a hum heard down
 telegraph wires from another, distant part of town ⁸⁷

The poet who, apart from Szirtes, most openly questioned the arbitrary superimposition between West and East was probably Ken Smith. As will be shown later on, Smith's post-wall output best exposes such sensitivity; but earlier works such as *Fox Running* and *Wormwood*, let it already emerge: his *personae* and his characters were the clearest embodiment of a liberal society where the individual is held responsible for his/her failures and losses.⁸⁸ Smith's specific critique of the Thatcher years and his glosses on the sense of failure and paranoia attending a vaster and vaster section of social outcasts were always specifically framed within the context of

⁸⁷ George Szirtes, 'History' in *An English Apocalypse* (Manchester: Bloodaxe, 1997), pp.62-3.

⁸⁸ See Ken Smith, *Fox Running* (London: Rolling Moss Press, 1980) and *Wormwood* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1987). In Smith, the tension between a feeling of helplessness as a reaction to inescapable control (on the part of the 'state', on the part of impersonal mechanisms of power) and the feeling of anomy and disconnection (on the part of the outcasts, the working-class and the underclasses) was from the very start, pungently framed within the Western context that bred it. The very loneliness of his *personae* or masks (such as the haunted 'Fox') is a striking commentary to Western society where social problems are regarded 'as an aggregation of individually experienced problems, demanding an individual solution' (Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege*, Cambridge: Polity: 2001, p.122). Both *Fox Running* and *Wormwood* foreshadow the downbeat note struck in his post-Wall collection *The Heart, the Border*: no longer 'tracked', as happened in *Fox Running*, nor imprisoned, as in *Wormwood*, Smith's *personae* voice an elegiac 'tribute' to Britain in 'The London Poems': 'These are the Silvertown Blues,/ *Fight the Rich* ghosting out/in concrete, by the flyover./No one ever gets straight here. The ego's self tale is miserable, nothing much happens but murder./Yet that these wastes be repeopled/and the rich inherit, everyone's/moving downriver. This is *the zone*,/ carved from the sour and floury air/of London's residuary body, /filling with cranes and dust/ and the racket of money being made...' ('The Enterprise Zone', *Heart* 21).

British society. Real totalitarian control is only hinted at within the totally different context of the East, perceived and represented as non-appropriable by an outsider viewpoint, in his famous, challenging poem ‘the Secret Police’.⁸⁹ More explicitly than his fellow writers, Smith underlined his distance from the Eastern world he was exploring; totalitarianism, either as experienced in the Eastern bloc, or as a supposed threat to Western society, was neither realistically nor figuratively contemplated. Though the totalitarian past lurked behind the writings of both Szirtes and Smith, it fell quite outside the scope of representation of British post-Wall poetry.

Ken Smith’s poignant claim, in his 1989 poem ‘The Wall’ (*The Heart the Border* 58) that ‘it is/ as if we were each others’ ghosts’ was therefore not a reminder of the pessimistic and abortive mainstream socio-political analysis. It was rather an insight into the specific incidence of the Eastern European histories on Western and British historical imagination, and into a quite deeper understanding of ambivalence to which his generation was largely committed. At the end of the Cold War age, to face ‘the ghosts’ meant – in the West no less than in the East – to do away with residual gaps and politics of memory imposed on both sides of the Curtain to silence history. It primarily meant to formulate a dystopic image of Europe rather than a dystopic confrontation with the ‘other side’ of it.

I.3 The post-Wall age and its ambivalence

For almost thirty years, the Berlin Wall was the symbol of the division between two blocs and of a subtler division of Europe from its recent memory, as Frederick Taylor shows in his recent study of Cold War Europe.⁹⁰ Significantly, towards the end and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the borders between West and East looked both hardened and porous in British poetry. Less

⁸⁹‘They are listening in the wires/in the walls, under the eaves/in the wings of the house martins,/in the ears of old women, in the mouths of children. //They are listening to this now./So let’s hear it for the secret police, a much understood minority./After all, they have their rights, /their own particular ways of seeing things,/cooking things,/they have a culture uniquely their own.//and we think /they should have their own state...’ (*Shed*, 280). As Smith explained in his recording, this oft-quoted poem was written in Ukraine in the early nineties (see *The Poetry Quartets* 3, Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998, Tape 2, Side B, Selection 3) and was therefore meant as a half-concerned, half humorous response to the specific climate of paranoia he found there.

⁹⁰ See Frederick Taylor, *The Berlin Wall: 13 August 1961-9 November 1989* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp.637-668.

liable to being appropriated, the East looked in fact unmistakably distant but was obviously closer than ever before.

If during the Cold War a curtain of unreality had descended across the world, things changed when the Eastern European ‘geography of oblivion’ – as Aleida Assmann would put it ⁹¹ – slowly moved westwards. The end of grand narratives was followed, in part at least, by a sort of mirror reading into a few, selected landscapes: the bicephalous German territory, the transit zones of central Europe, the Second World War sites, and the decaying industrial landscapes of Eastern Europe. None of these landscapes failed to impress its mould upon the imagination of poets who were faced with, and questioned in distinctive ways, the central experience of post-war moral and material reconstruction.

Already before 1989, some anticipation of a wide, European impending crisis had surfaced in the work of poets whose historical focus on the East had been steadfast, though hardly ‘politicized’. The presence of boundaries, the immobility and stagnation that characterised the Cold War vision and was exorcised by a rising sense of catastrophism at the beginning of the eighties was quite inverted, for example, in James Fenton’s vision of perennial migration. With the hindsight of a post-Balkan era, that vision looks nowadays ominous, foreshadowing real migrations westward:

This is the wind, the wind in a field of corn,
great crowds are fleeing from a major disaster
down the long valleys, the green swaying wadis,
down the beautiful catastrophe of the wind ⁹²

Even more crucially, Michael Hulse voiced an Audenesque sense of apprehension over the destiny of Europe. Aptly titled *Knowing and Forgetting*, his collection of the early eighties displayed an unfocused vision of Europe where the borders separating the East from the West are

⁹¹ See Aleida Assmann’s concept of oblivion as a dynamics structural to memory, and liable to be disrupted in spontaneous or induced forms of individual and collective reimaginings of the past: *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Beck, 1999).

⁹² James Fenton, ‘Wind’, in *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1983* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983; hereafter *Memory of War*), p. 40.

not reassuring. On the Western side of the Wall, the world does not look safer than the (invisible) world beyond it:

Somewhere in this European darkness
 a woman is working at a window
 watching the falling snow [...]
 Meetings and departures: the map, networked
 with track, shows us the routes that take us back
 to origins we lack.

What shall we say were the reasons we passed
 our chance by tonight? For we have passed
 our chance now. Our last.

Today we have been out in the fields,
 drawing conclusions from blades of grass.
 We have learnt: after rain the earth stirs.
 We have learnt : there is warmth at the world's
 core. We have identified soldiers
 known and unknown, murdered and missing,
 posted outside Derry pubs or on
 East European borders, sitting
 in bar in Nurnberg, lounging in
 restaurant overlooking the Rhine ⁹³

The metahistorical afflatus in Fenton is blunted by more specific historical references in Hulse, but Fenton and Hulse shared, at least at this stage, a peculiarly decentred vision of Europe. Though Hulse's poem presents us with a plural pronoun – the pronoun of the 'witness' – its subject is not less disembodied than the crowds featuring in Fenton's poem. Obliquely, readers glimpse a world already threatened by a diffused, disquieting instability, which binds the British scene together with its continental counterpart: the soldiers posted outside Derry, and those sitting on restaurant tables in (real or imagined?) Nuremberg point to a troubled present as well as to a troubled past. The terrorism of oppressed minorities and the ghost of Fascism, alongside the threat hidden 'beyond the border', point to the crucial triangle that has haunted European liberal democracies, and Great Britain, since the eighties.

⁹³ Michael Hulse, 'Knowing and Forgetting' in *Englische Lyrik*, ed. by Häfner, pp. 43-44. The poem was originally published in *Knowing and Forgetting* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1982).

Eastern geography included zones of European history from which Western memory could not, or would not, be totally wrenched. The invisibility of Central-Eastern Europe in the West had actually been strategic in many ways. The Cold War did not only guarantee the relative balance of political deterrence: it was likewise crucial to freeze historical anxieties inherent in the pre-Wall situation on either side of the Curtain: the memory of European fascism, the relative indifference to the history of persecuted minorities, or the rising concern with the fate of the Eastern labour which would eventually take shelter in Western Europe.⁹⁴

1989 destroyed the pre-Wall balance and set loose the powerful interplay between imagination and awareness that Ken Smith condensed in his prose-poem *Chinese Whispers*:

‘Memory and anticipation,’ we said, ‘the dreamed and the imagined and the actual are all alike. So there is one hole in the wall and one door at least against the onrush of time [...] we open that door; for us it is the poem.’⁹⁵

Smith’s meta-poetic claim was in keeping with the post-modern sense of de-realisation which haunted the Western world until 1989 and was expressed by Harrison’s verse: ‘since 1945 past and present are the same/and it doesn’t matter if it’s ‘real’ or ‘play’,/imagination and reality both go the same way.’⁹⁶ Both Smith’s and Harrison’s remarks were substantiated by the metamorphoses his and his generation’s worldview was undergoing. For them, as for the younger Fenton and Szirtes (and Hulse), the superposition of imagination, memory and awareness led, in the first place, to a historical apprehension that the end of the Cold War made more evident. As soon as ‘hidden’ areas of their historical awareness started to re-emerge, not long before 1989, the nexus actual/imaginary refracted on memory itself. Hidden ambivalences

⁹⁴ On the paradigmatic case of post-1989 Germany and the political response to its reunification, see Taylor *The Berlin Wall*, pp. 637-668. An insightful key to the Western concern with the emergence of post-wall Central Eastern Europe is in George Konrad, *The Melancholy of Rebirth: Essays from Post-Communist Central Europe: 1989-1994* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

⁹⁵ Ken Smith, *A Book of Chinese Whispers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1987), p. 33.

⁹⁶ Tony Harrison, *The Common Chorus: An Adaptation of Aristophanes’ ‘Lysistrata’* ([1987] London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 47. Written towards the end of the Cold War, ‘Lysistrata’ was inspired by women’s protests in Greenham Common against the British Government decision to site Cruise missiles in the U.K.

became more evident. Older enemies than the Eastern ‘Other’, unknown yet familiar as in Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’,⁹⁷ started to surface in poetry.

British cinema, rather than fiction or drama, provides a striking example of the historical and moral debates which are imbricated in the Eastern-inspired poetic narratives of the mid- and late eighties. In Ken Loach’s *Fatherland* (1986),⁹⁸ the GDR singer Dittermann flees his country thanks to an American producer who promises to help him look for his father, a Communist hero who left Germany for good twenty years before. Once in West Berlin, the singer feels rather ill at ease with the surrounding environment, loath as he is to accept the patronizing attitude of the press and of his supporters who boast about saving him from the yoke of GDR government and censorship. Dittermann eventually travels to Southern England, where a French mole has apparently spotted his father. On his arrival in England, though, Dittermann’s hopes are irremediably crushed: informed by the mole, he gradually learns about his father’s past collaboration with the Nazis during WWII. The ‘communist myth’ crumbles down as the two finally meet, Dittermann listens to his father’s confessions without ever revealing his identity and thoroughly refrains from judging him.

Loach’s short-lived departure from his steadfast commitment to ‘the state of the Nation’ was one of the few attempts made to embrace a European perspective on contemporary history.⁹⁹ Though some trace of the Cold War ideological backbone might be detected in the clear-cut opposition between the dissident disillusioned with his life under communism, and the imperceptive, self-complacent Western agents and press, Loach’s film is very much a movie of the last Cold War years. The moral standpoint it endorsed reflected questions that had been lurking for quite a long time but which the late eighties propulsion would liberate. The fact that Trevor Griffith, one of the most heavily censored dramatists of the Thatcher age, provided the

⁹⁷ Wilfred Owen, ‘Strange Meeting’, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. by C.D. Lewis (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.35.

⁹⁸ Ken Loach, *Fatherland* (screenplay by Trevor Griffith; UK: Channel Four Films, 1986).

⁹⁹ A possible subtext of *Fatherland* could be found in the story of Rolf Biermann, the German folksinger whom the GDR expelled in the late seventies, thus unwillingly fostering dissent in the world of music and literature in particular. On the Biermann *affaire*, see Anna Chiarloni and Helga Pankoke, *Grenzfall Gedichte*, (Berlin: Aufbau, 1995), pp. 32-44.

original screenplay for the film shows how deeply Britain's internal situation could bear on wider, European concerns.¹⁰⁰ The radically different forms coercion can take under a totalitarian regime or in a liberal democratic system dependent upon 'imposed' consent harassed Western artists who confronted the experience of dissenters, or self-exiled writers. Significantly, a further element adds to, and in some way reconfigures, Loach's paranoid portrait of Europe: the non-negotiated memory of the Second World War, exposed with Loach's typical sensitivity to the consequences of moral compromise. Anticipating a strain that would emerge soon after 1989, but which found its immediate context in the years that preceded it, Loach undermined those deep-seated 'red' post-war narratives of anti-fascist victory as much as British novelists such as Graham Swift or (somewhat later) John Banville would undermine the Western, European and British version of the myth.¹⁰¹

In the mid-eighties, Loach's Germany had a familiar cast, especially for those audiences whose notion of the East had been literary rather than filmic. As a matter of fact, Eastern Germany hardly features in the film, except for some long takes over the Wall revealing a geometry of huge square buildings and the drab everyday life of people dressed in grey. The oneiric sections where the main character is seen being stalked and attacked by policemen or, more plausibly, Stasi agents, look, however, more relevant to the kind of 'communist world' people were likely to bear in their minds. The condensation of the dream logic allows Loach to capture a highly stylised Eastern European setting.¹⁰² More than the old-type factories, more than overcrowded square buildings, more than (moving toward a leftist imagination) the last shreds of smouldering dreams of egalitarianism and classlessness, it was the idea of persecution, of inescapable control and of possible violence that still identified 'the East': a distilled image of deadlocked countries, the obscure 'land' of totalitarian oppression (an identification which

¹⁰⁰ On Trevor Griffith's presence on the British stage of the eighties, see John Bull, *Stage Right*, pp. 31-3.

¹⁰¹ The 'ghost' of fascism has actually haunted Graham Swift's family narratives, like the early *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1983). More recently, John Banville contributed to the same issue, using the thriller genre to question the memory of Second World War in *Shroud* (1993).

¹⁰² The use of this term refers to Peter Barry's distinction between 'geography' and 'setting', the former relevant to the cultural, extra-textual code that informs the representation of a place, the latter relevant to the intersection between such a co-textual connotative range and a more strictly textual, semic code realised within the text. See Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry*, pp. 48-60.

would appear quite untenable, had Loach focused on Poland or Czechoslovakia, but which in this case looked plausible). Significantly, in the film this thread is less psychologically or emotionally poignant than the subtextual intersection of Ditterman's personal story with fascism. Loach's treatment of the 'German problem' still spoke volumes in so far as it captured the ideological confusion of the late eighties, where the paradigmatic case of Germany invited a rising concern with Western rather than Eastern totalitarianism.

The representation of Germany proposed by Loach, as well as his peculiar blending of symbolic abstraction and political notation, was well rooted in the 'East' which had been looming in British literature and in the Western collective imagination. It had long been crystallised in images, such as those evoked by Roy Fisher's famous poem 'Seven Attempted Moves' through which the rational brutality of oppression was disquietingly apprehended in the early seventies.¹⁰³ The neat, impassionate testimony attempted by Fisher through the use of impersonality, ellipsis and syntactical neatness captured, in a rather deadpan way, the terror of carefully administered, oppressive power:

Under the portico
 huge-winged shadows
 hang
 brown, with a scent
 of powdered leather. Up the steps
 into this depth. Recession.
 Promise of star-scratched dark.

Then put your ear to the door,
 listen.
 As in a shell
 to the traffic
 slithering along behind it.
 Here are the schoolroom chairs on which
 the ministers in the playground
 sat to be shot¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ See Adam Piette, 'Cold War Poetry' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Kendall, pp.638-42.

¹⁰⁴ Roy Fisher, 'Seven Attempted Moves', in *The Dow Low Drop: New and Selected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1996). Lion Proquest. Track: Fisher, Roy. <<http://www.lion.chadwick.co.uk>> [3 March 2008].

Fisher's impassioned tone was still highly resonant, years after persecution in the East had partially lost its grip (the slackening of persecution was counterpointed by a few examples that were visible in the rest of Europe and in Britain, such as the events of Poland at the beginning of the eighties). The sense of helplessness which he expressed when setting out to 'bear witness' to the tragic and distant past was quite significant. In its substance, though not in its dramatic approach, Fisher's poem drew close to Geoffrey Hill's 'September Song',¹⁰⁵ which in the late sixties had captured the hesitation of a poet (removed, both spatially and temporally, from the place of tragedy) facing the silence imposed by the legacy of Nazism.¹⁰⁶ Because of their subject matter, and of their peculiar involvement (both were born in the early thirties) both Fisher and Hill provided a still enthralling view of the past. Yet the sense of helplessness permeating their poems risked to inform the vision of history which was likely to be endorsed by their readers. For those born after, this helplessness needed to be questioned and qualified.

The late eighties, and more directly the post-Wall age, brought to light the contiguity and the possible superimposition between these two images of European terror. Eastern terror had represented a mirror both to the submerged imagination of right-wing totalitarianism exorcised by post-war narratives and to that vaster, Kafkian nightmare of modernity¹⁰⁷ transmogrified and rewritten into the post-modern age. Appropriated in the post-wall West, the notion of Eastern totalitarianism was liable to a fruitful reconnotation, as it started to reflect in the first place the more ubiquitous image of a 'boot stamping on the human face, forever' as the very landmark of contemporary history. The overarching impression made by Orwell's dystopia condensed that sense of criminalization and annihilation of the Other which came finally to be recognised as the powerful legacy of twentieth-century total wars. By the mid-eighties, this legacy formed the

¹⁰⁵ Geoffrey Hill, 'September Song' in *King Log* (André Deutsch: London, 1968), p 19.

¹⁰⁶ See Jon Silkin's essential review of Geoffrey Hill's 'song' in R.K. Meiners, 'Mourning for Ourselves and for Poetry. The Lyric after Auschwitz', *The Centennial Review* 35:3 (1991), 545-90.

¹⁰⁷ In his reading of Kafka's *The Trial*, George Steiner condenses the book's strong appeal to those born late in its capacity to foresee 'the inferno of modern bureaucracy, the imputed guilt, [...] the anonymities of death as these characterise twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. (*No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*, London: Faber & Faber, 1996, pp. 239-252, pp. 251-2). The impersonal administration of power is one of the most troubling aspects of the intersection between the modernity bodied forth by contemporary power organisation in the West (and its past totalitarian drift) and the modern administration of public and private life in communist East. Tactfully invoking no parallel, British poets would not fail to hint at this hideous connection.

spine of a still open-ended narrative of confrontation with the other – a narrative of enmity – which embraced a super-ideological perspective and required a re-contextualisation into the present. To return to Ken Smith's words, the ghosts released by the fall of the Wall were both an unknown 'Other' and a removed past which kept returning.

As a matter of fact, by the mid-eighties the identification between 'Eastern Europe' and 'the great terror' had grown possibly crippling. Signalling the ultimate drift of 'Eastern' socialist modernity, it actually prevented or discouraged any deeper consideration of the different socio-political realities of Eastern countries; on top of that, it ushered in a paralysing notion of history which could hardly be reconciled with the climate of bottom-up tensions that characterised Europe in the eighties. For British poets who shifted their gaze eastwards, radicalism meant, partly at least, to face the moral ambivalence with which Western Europe experienced the (Eastern) 'European darkness' of Hulse's poem. As if their sense of active agency in history had long been investigated and found wanting, poets had to look elsewhere in order to gain insight into their present age.

The shift from isolation to a sense of involvement in the 'Other', and the need to fix collective consciousness into wider historical frames were both consistently and urgently stressed. The 'national' and challengingly retrospective edge to 'global' concerns was central and critically grounded in the transition to the post-Wall age in the nineties. As late as 1987, Michael Schmidt joined Mario Vargas Llosa in objecting to the international intellectuals' impulse to 'displace domestic disaffections onto foreign affairs' in relation to a still 'hot' Cold War contention.¹⁰⁸ Llosa and Schmidt underlying suggestion was to bridge the gap between displacement and connection, and it was probably spurred, in Valencia where the two met, by the presence of Stephen Spender – a representative of the generation that had experienced similar doubts.

Running against the grain of Western moral confidence, a re-reading of European history was finally resumed, even when, as happened with Ken Loach's early gaze eastwards, such connection was not so immediate and photographed a wide ideological confusion rather than a

¹⁰⁸ Michael Schmidt, 'Valencia, June 1987', *Poetry News Supplement: The International Congress of Intellectuals and Artists*. 14:3 (1987), 85-88, p.85.

shift to the post-ideological phase.¹⁰⁹ In its dysphoric view of the possible contacts between Eastern and Western society, Loach's film still provides, albeit tangentially, a nuclear outline of the trajectory poetry embraced on the verge of 1989. If the long absence of Eastern Europe from geopolitical maps hardly paved the way for a receptive apprehension of 1989 and its aftermath, a more dynamic apprehension of history was actually triggered off by the cautious discovery of post-wall geography. Needless to say, re-charting the East was an extremely filtered move: the higher relevance of the memory of fascism as compared to the imagination of Eastern totalitarianism is *per se* a telling hint of these poets' understanding of commitment as moral engagement with shared history. Poetic journeying across the East proved subversive and challenging in establishing possible counternarratives of the post-1989 phase. The relative indifference to the specifically post-communist identity in the former Eastern bloc countries may represent a major limit to the 'documentary' value of this poetic strain. Nevertheless, a fruitful counterbalance was provided by a shared focus on the realities of migrant communities, of exposed social groups – for example, those which survived camps, but were nonetheless subjected to the destroying sweep of industrialisation – and of all those people who were silenced by the coordinate effect of Eastern and Western politics. The fact that segments of Eastern societies did, or might have got in contact with the West, was not lost to the most ironic commentators of Western society, Harrison and Smith, whereas Szirtes could bring the vexed question of migration into light at a time when migrant identities were starting to be co-opted into the mainstream.

¹⁰⁹ Loach's claim after the film release that his subject was 'the West and England' makes sense when considering the retrospective interrogation that lies at the core of *Fatherland*, even though, as has been argued, the claim is much less transparent in terms of political and social analysis (see John Hill, 'Politics and aesthetics in *Fatherland*', in *Agents of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach*, ed. by George McKnight, Westpoint: Praeger, 1997, pp. 125-144) In this respect, Ken Loach's most recent film, *It's a Free World* (2007) provides a much more questioning and historically focused analysis of the relationship between Western and Eastern world – with a possible extension onto global concerns – in the post-wall age. With the hindsight of current developments, Loach captures the parallel and intertwined development in the mechanism of economic and social exploitation of labour, drawing both from his working-class background and from a careful observation of how the East entered Western socio-economic texture within the post-industrial frame. Loach's viewpoint is politically engaged and analytical but draws very close to Tony Harrison's post-wall visions in *Prometheus* ([1998] *Collected Film Poetry*, London: Faber & Faber, 2007, pp. 255-375).

The border areas were the first where the post-1989 implosion of Cold War patterns of historical interpretation became palpable. Eastern Germany, together with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary hid a cluster of narratives which turned up to be no less difficult to address for Britain than for Germany, or to a less degree, more exposed Western realities, such as Italy and France. Once ‘the curtain of unreality’ that had obscured the East was lifted up, the bracing perception of the Cold War mutual, distorted creation of the ‘other’ gave way to a process of self-comprehension: on the one hand, this did not disprove Houswitschka’s and Hallberg’s view of the East as a lasting element of the Western self-identificatory process:

No matter whether they construe the spaces and places of the past, present or future, all literary efforts undertaken by authors of the ‘Anglosphere’ were ultimately written from an outside perspective although many writers had spent time in Germany or the post-communist world.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, however, this process resulted rather interestingly in the internalisation of historical categories developed within the obliquely visible areas beyond the wall. The world-view developed within the composite reality known as Central and Eastern Europe revealed its implicit appeal, which rested in the unparalleled stratification of its histories, and in the post-war fast overlay of conflicting political-ideological narratives. British poets first stepped into the close ‘Wild East’, areas where memory was besieged by political discourse, by the political manoeuvring of memory and by the tangible fabrication of popular imagination.

This ‘strange meeting’ with the East was developed on two different levels. On the one hand, the emergence of Eastern countries and of their movable borders urged poetry to face European history in such a way as to disentangle it from cold-war narratives: in Smith and Harrison, for example, Germany, Poland and Hungary are considered for both their communist past and for their Second World War memories; Fenton’s Berlin is an ‘unreal’ city, where post-war memory and oblivion cannot compromise, whereas Szirtes’ Hungary is a physical/mental place where the poet spins a web of memories across the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand,

¹¹⁰ Houswitschka and Hallberg, *Literary Views*, p.54.

both the past and the troubled present of the East led writers to develop a peculiar sensitivity to historical change inherent in the Eastern European worldview.

Although the experience of Eastern Europe in British verse was rather limited, it sealed crucially with the sensitivity to ‘history as fiction’ displayed by the British poets of the post-war generation, with their moral reservations and with the ideological reframing of their worldview. Shortly before 1989 (as was the case with Fenton) but above all after 1989 (as was the case with Harrison, Smith and Szirtes), the experience of Eastern Europe defused the potential sense of an ending which – even on the left – had accompanied the Cold War and its re-escalation in the early eighties. The delusive apprehension of having survived a possible catastrophe was counterweighed by the increasing realisation of what had already been possible and affected the consciousness of the future. 1989 therefore signalled a move forward to a cohesive though transient view of present-day Europe, and a shift backwards into the stories that revolved around it.¹¹¹

In this respect, George Szirtes provided a long-awaited connection between the East and the West precisely by interrogating history through a series of poems written in the mid-eighties and featuring in his 1991 collection, aptly called *Bridge Passages*.¹¹² Since then, Szirtes has attempted at re-examining the past and foregrounding the impasse variously resented by his generation and by the older Harrison and Smith. The urgent need to bear witness to history has typically emerged alongside an interrogation of our representation of it – a reflection that intertwines an almost journalistic interest with a historiographic concern and the moral doubt that loomed over this kind of testimonial trust. The strength of Szirtes’ verse into the past – and his ‘Eastern’ past in particular – with Western modes of reading into that past, and the specific anxieties those modes underlay. His responsiveness to the stratified history of his native country,

¹¹¹ Alan Sinfield has provided a crucial distinction between ‘histories’ as established, dominant discourses and patterns of historical representation and ‘stories’ as the essential “network[s] of lived and narrated stories, practices, strategies, representations, fantasies, negotiations and exchanges that along with the surviving aural, tactile and visual traces, fashion our experience of the past, of others and of ourselves”, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-war Britain* (London: Athlone, 1997), pp. 24-5.

¹¹² George Szirtes, *Bridge Passages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). All further references are to this edition. *Bridge Passages* is also a section of *The Budapest File* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000), a retrospective collection which includes Szirtes’ poems about his experience in Hungary. See ch. V, n. .

Hungary, and to the even more stratified history of the Hungarian Jewish community, engaged him in a gaze eastwards that was also a gaze backwards. In his poem/journal 'The Photographer in Winter' (1986),¹¹³ his *persona* is thus seen literally tracking his family through the past: past and present are constantly superimposed. The *persona* turns into a sort of spy or double who, in the climactic sequence, follows his mother as she self-absorbedly recollects her memories during a bus journey across England, and across her Hungary:

Too many marvels. Pagodas, ziggurats;
the follies of the snow. Geometries
in miniature, the larger symmetries
of cars, the onion domes of bollards, spires
on humble kiosks, stalactites on wires,
a vast variety of dazzling hats.

[...]

You catch the tram? I'll sit behind you where
you will not find me. I see your every move.

[...]

They will expect
immaculate appearances, discreet details. Please
cooperate with me and turn your head,
smile vacantly as if you were not dead
but walked through parallel worlds (25)

In 'The Photographer', Szirtes conveys the sense of history as irretrievable and stratified: 'there's nothing to betray. I am exposed/and doubled. I have grown two-faced, split skins,/ become a multiple'. More crucially, he manages to merge the idea of spying into the private lives of people with the Western anxiety over individual existences shrinking to a more and more private dimension. An inward space which is both fostered and paradoxically violated by the growing tendency to publicly expose all that does not fit into social order: first of all, experiences of social marginalisation.

¹¹³ George Szirtes, 'The Photographer in Winter', in *The Photographer in Winter* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), pp. 20-26.

Szirtes' poem can provide an introduction to the questions examined in this peculiar selection of British poetry not just because of this careful treatment of history and of his self-questioning stance, but also because of the way he articulates his perspective. Szirtes, who has often been stressing the liminal status of immigrants (of his, and his parents' generation) re-defines a particular mode of story-telling which Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison first called 'secret narrative' in their introduction to the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Verse* (1982).¹¹⁴ Clearly at variance with the impersonality and the outsiderism associated with this mode, he nonetheless uses and questions it to reread the history of persecution and its subsequent submersion through the experience of a woman doubly silenced because of her migration to a foreign land. The impact of estrangement is strong, but it is significant that the subtextual use of a Western idea of the East (condensed in the cliché of the 'spy') should depart from the parodistic use of the same theme made, for example, by Tony Harrison in the early 'Curtain sonnets.' (CP 56-61) Abandoning parody but still drawing on popular representations of the East, the Anglo-Hungarian poet testifies to another kind of potential which lies in his gaze eastward. He actually turns the idea of totalitarian encroachment on private life into a poetic frame to interrogate the other's (his mother's) personal history and show the inevitable limits of such inquiry.

For all the specificity of Szirtes' poetry and his grasp of history, his late-eighties production signals a wider re-vision endorsed more generally by British poetry. Strung between the opposite poles of impersonality and personal endorsement, questioning the very possibility of a narrative that might fulfil the potential of poetry in a still barbaric age, poets started to question their position as both reportage writers and late-born witnesses, and to articulate their own stance as writers involved in the highly ambivalent narrative that 1989 could not definitely seal.

In the early poems of Fenton, as well as in the mature work of Harrison, Smith and Szirtes, drawing close to the East meant to shed light on the possible intersection where the lost tracks of

¹¹⁴ See Motion and Morrison, 'Introduction' to *Contemporary British Poetry*, pp. 18-20. Referring to the more radical and post-modernist trend endorsed by James Fenton among others, the secret narrative might be now regarded as the expression of a shared distrust of narration itself, and of a concern with the growing unbalance between the private and public spheres of life. In the radical writing of those years, the same scepticism brought a reaction to the silence imposed by the need of 'political correctness'.

Eastern history crossed with those, less apparently lost, of Western history. In their vision of a shared past – in particular, in the experience of Eastern and Western totalitarianism, in the end of the industrial age, in the shocking experience of migration at the age of post-national modernity – these poets captured three different but interlocking and dialoguing aspects of modernity which had a necessary bearing onto the present-postmodern age. As the very geography onto which they started to re-map European history reveals, their poetry testified to an affinity with the historical sensitivity displayed by Eastern European writers who since the zenith of the Cold War had implicitly provided a crucial, and European, stimulus against British insularity and helped to reconfigure the problem of ‘European civilisation’.

II. Under Western eyes: British poetry and the question of Central-Eastern Europe

II. 1. The twofold legacy of the seventies

Two elements in the poetic commitment to the ‘Eastern other’ from the mid-eighties to the noughts are particularly compelling: the foregrounding of the Eastern European region as distinct from the Soviet sphere and the relatively non-political readings poets suggest, or at least, their departure from the Cold War Weltanschauung. If poetry pursued a quite independent path across the former ‘Eastern bloc’, some aspects of the British cultural and poetic scene might help to frame its idiosyncrasies. When around the mid-eighties, British poets started to remap Central-Eastern Europe, their discovery was actually backed by an intellectual climate which had increasingly opened to the ‘Western’ outposts of the Eastern bloc.

In 1986, Seamus Heaney delivered a series of lectures which partly revolved on the role and the work of writers from the Soviet bloc. His assessment of exiled or dissident writers could be read through the lenses of Heaney’s main assumption. Commitment, he claimed, does not necessarily entail the espousal of a political stance; it rather implies a balance between the irresponsible impulse that fuels evasion and lyricism and the impulse to bear witness to experience and to be sympathetic with ‘the doomed, the deprived, the victimised, the underprivileged’¹¹⁵ history leaves behind. In his view, this balance had been particularly endorsed by a generation of Eastern European writers whose role as unacknowledged legislators of their countries entailed drawing from a cluster of histories which were specific to the area in between the blocs, but which the political regime made tongueless. In his reading of the Polish-Lithuanian writer Czeslaw Miłosz, he thus underlined the sense of historical testimony in poems

written by somebody who resisted the Nazi occupation of Poland and had broken from the ranks of the People’s Republic after the war [...] It is therefore typical of work by many other poets, particularly in the Soviet

¹¹⁵ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S.Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London, Faber & Faber, 1988), p. xvi.

republics and the Warsaw Pact countries, whose poetry not only witnesses to the poet's refusal to lose his or her cultural memory but also testifies thereby to the continuing efficacy of poetry itself as a necessary and fundamental human act.¹¹⁶

'Dissident' Eastern European poetry embodied, in Heaney's view, the power of those who spoke for the powerless, against and despite the 'wooden language' of dominant power and its deliberate manoeuvring or erasure of memory.

This appeal to poetry as the very language of political and cultural resistance was no doubt consistent with the Irish poet's subtle response to the great divisions of the eighties – the 'dreadful schism in the British Nation' in Tony Harrison's words.¹¹⁷ As the poetry of the eighties made clear, these fractures surfaced in the language poets used, as reminders of other languages they had to leave behind: Irish, the working class idiom, or any language flourishing within British increasingly multi-cultural reality.

To refer back to Michael Hulse's poem, Heaney was implicitly striking the 'Derry' note of the European darkness. Yet the European darkness mattered to him as much as the Irish question. Heaney's life-long allegiance to the notion of poetry as 'inner emigration' enabled him to capture visions those Eastern European poets were handing down onto future generations. The testimonial cast Heaney ascribed to poetry thus hammered home Czeslaw Miłosz' perception of poetry as hinging on the same, urgent appeal to bear witness to man, whose '*gestae* are constantly falsified'.¹¹⁸

Despite the repeated reference to political dissidence, Heaney's shift of focus from commitment to the testimonial and judicial power of poetry was deeply in tune with the particular cultural climate that writers like Miłosz had secured in the West. For all their indictment of non democratic regimes, 'ideology' was not a keyword for the Polish writer, and it was certainly not for Heaney. In his reading, communism featured as the depriving condition

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹¹⁷ Burke's phrase is quoted in Tony Harrison's 'Classics Society' (CP 130).

¹¹⁸ Czeslaw Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Norton Eliot Lectures 1981-2* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 91.

Eastern European poets resist, rather than as the only experience through which the West should read them. The darkness which had dawned on Eastern Europe since 1945 was terrible: but it was by no means the first to haunt the peoples living there, as Miłosz claimed in the *Witness of Poetry* lectures to which Heaney's were related.

By the mid-eighties, Miłosz was not only the Polish poet most widely translated into English: he was a (perhaps the) crucial figure amongst intellectuals who for years had supported the 'Eastern cause', mediating between the Western apprehension of the Eastern bloc and the intellectual and cultural frameworks through which Eastern Europe was attempting to redefine itself, bearing witness to its own history.

Eastern Europe's¹¹⁹ troubled relation with recent history was to affect both its redefinition and its prospective reintroduction to democracy and freedom. It was, in fact, a decisive element of political discourse when the Eastern world reemerged as a cluster of nations and regions in the post-Wall age, as it had been long before 1989. While Heaney meditated on Eastern European poetry, the former inter-blocs buffer region, '[the] uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany',¹²⁰ was actually taking centre stage in the prospective integration of Europe, and a cluster of questions inherent to it seeped into its cross-cultural dialogue with the West. If this region had been sitting quite uncomfortably between West and East for decades, overshadowed in cultural discourse and in the European imagination by the Cold War rift, its significance in the West seemed by then totally changed.

This change reached back to the seventies, when different perceptions on either side of the Iron Curtain attended the initial erosion of Cold War worldviews. In that decade, the overall climate of détente failed to hide an opposite radicalization of political polarities within the West. In Europe and in the USA, anti-Soviet feelings were fostered by the presence of the Russian and

¹¹⁹An articulate history of the cultural and political redefinition of Central and Eastern Europe across the pre- and post-Wall scenarios is provided by Paul Robert Magocsi in his *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1993) where he identifies the following countries as Central Eastern European: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, former Yugoslavia (except for Albania), Poland, Romania, and Lithuania. The same configuration is proposed by Richard Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.391-418.

¹²⁰ Milan Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Eastern Europe' in *From Stalinism to Pluralism. A Documentary History of Eastern Europe since 1945*, ed. by Gale Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 217-224, p. 221.

Eastern European dissident intelligentsia.¹²¹ Whereas dissident writers clearly pushed the revolutionary process forward, its assessment in the West had, however, some controversial consequences. On the one hand, the broadly anti-totalitarian stance endorsed by anti-Soviet intellectuals like Alexandr Solzhenitsyn enhanced dichotomic views which leaked into the cultural representations of the former Other in the eighties and nineties, when the ‘Eastern bloc’ hostage to Soviet totalitarianism was still a staple ingredient of Western cultural discourse. On the other hand, however, Eastern European writers opened to the subversion of this narrative by overtly contesting the wholesale inclusion of Soviet satellites in the blanket notion of Eastern bloc. Within the wider frame of a far from unresolved Cold War tension, a politically and culturally separate space was created which eventually depolarized and undermined such framework from within.

All through the following decades, this space became more and more relevant to internal and international geopolitics. For Central-Eastern Europe, the dominant and most problematic element of redefinition revolved in fact on its communist and, after 1989, post-communist identity. The need to disentangle oneself and one’s country from the communist legacy was urgent and particularly demanding. On a largely cultural level, a shared attempt to eradicate the historical interpretations imposed by communism was building up, albeit in radically different ways. Retrieving and guarding the cultural memory of nations and borders, the countries’ specific and shared histories, was to become part of the reappropriation of the post-Wall age. Then it sealed with Eastern Europe’s most resonant claims: on the one hand, the claim for pluralism and representation, as formulated by the movement which on the continent and in the UK won much consensus, ‘Charter 77’;¹²² on the other hand, the claim for truth, which in 1989 was symbolically condensed in the reburial of Imre Nagy in Hungary, an act of defiance to the government’s official interpretation of the 1956 ‘antisocialist’ uprising. As Padraic Kenney

¹²¹ The decade opened in fact with Alexandr Solzhenitsyn’s ‘exemplary’ expulsion from the USSR (1974) and closed on the ‘dissident’ season in the GDR (1979-80), led by the folksinger Rolf Biermann (see ch. 1, n.). In the meantime, in both the USA and Western Europe the debate on Eastern Europe was brought about by ‘defectors’ who are discussed later in the chapter. On the history of dissidence in the East, see Barbara Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003).

¹²² Gale Stokes, ‘Charter 77’ in Gale Stokes ed., *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, pp. 163-7.

suggests, ‘working through the past in Eastern Europe turned out to be a requirement for international strategy and thus for recognition.’¹²³ Silenced peoples and memories were part of the democratic project onto which Eastern Europe was embarking. When ‘the fall of Communism brought in its wake a torrent of bitter memories’¹²⁴ which the Cold War had occluded, these had to reflow into the various states’ local re-articulation of a shared historical and cultural legacy, in order to secure future perspectives.

Considering its strictly political extension to Germany that lasted until 1989, inter-bloc geography was always quite uneven and destabilising factors survived the post-Wall phase. The instability was even greater when cultural memory was taken into consideration. This unbalance surfaced quite markedly between the late Cold War years and the early post-Wall age, when the ‘region’ was split into different areas, territories of European self-identification as well as geopolitical realities. Significantly enough, the former did not necessarily coincide with the latter. While the political unbalance within the new ‘Eastern countries’ was evident in the distance between, for example, Poland and Romania, the journey towards peaceful democracy was held back by the lacerating breaking and making of nations in the Balkans, a region that in fact would soon be perceived as ‘external’ to Europe itself, much more distant than in its former non-aligned position between East and West.

If the memory of oppression did not guarantee the absence of conflict between the newly designed countries and their multiple identities, its reemersion all across the region was a factor of uneasiness, despite the crucial role it played in Central and Eastern Europe’s shift toward the West. Since 1989, a shared historical heritage, stretching back to the first half of the century, emerged almost abruptly, having Germany as its epicentre and propagating through the contiguous zones of liberated Central Europe. Divided Germany, whose role was essential to the post-Wall reconfiguration, was until 1989 the closest, problematic outpost of communism. Once reunified and ‘unbound’, it became the problematic place for European redefinition, its all too recent past looming over both the reception of its still commanding role on a European level and

¹²³ Padraic Kenney, *The Burdens of Freedom: Eastern Europe since 1989* (Fernwood: Nova Scotia, 2006), p.98.

¹²⁴ Judt, *Post-War*, p.824.

the vaster project of cultural redefinition.¹²⁵ As Tony Judt points out, the Holocaust was pivotal to the reunified European memory:

For Jews, concluded Heinrich Heine, baptism is their ‘European entry ticket’. But that was in 1825, when the price for admission to the modern world was the relinquishing of an oppressive heritage of Jewish difference and isolation...In an ironic twist that Heine – with his prophetic intimations of ‘wild, dark times rumbling towards us’ – would have appreciated better than anyone, those who would become full Europeans in the dawn of the twenty-first century must first assume a new and far more oppressive heritage. Today the pertinent European reference is not baptism. It is extermination.¹²⁶

The memory of the Jewish Holocaust and of nazifascism was in fact the most extreme and unspeakable part of a vaster cluster of memories associated to social, ethnic and religious minorities, and the part that was most manoeuvred during the Cold War years. East of Germany, this heterogeneous heritage spread across Central Eastern Europe, touching the Vizegrad region (Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary). After 1989, this region came to embody the reality of peaceful, ‘velvet’ transitions to the post-communist area in the Western imagination;¹²⁷ yet its cultural re-integration into Europe was relatively thwarted by two germane questions: its complex post-war history and its specific multi-ethnic constitution. Finally, the areas on the borders with Russia and in the Balkans, which most corresponded to the ‘anomic’, dark side of the post-Wall Europe, defined a parallel, but just as important series of problems.

These geographies were intrinsically captured by British poets who engaged with the former Eastern bloc. The poetic interest they took in the European East actually coincided with a demanding cross-cultural retrospective sweep, which harnessed domestic anxieties to a genuine attempt to understand the former Other, following the decentring impulse which Heaney had foregrounded. In sharp contrast to fiction, where the polarities of the Cold War worldview permeated the vision of the former Eastern bloc well into the nineties,¹²⁸ poetry accommodated

¹²⁵ See Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Germany Unbound’, in *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Dispatches from Europe in the Nineties* (New York: Random House, 1999), pp. 57-71.

¹²⁶ Judt, *Post-War*, p. 803.

¹²⁷ See Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, pp. 407-15.

¹²⁸ The transplantation of anti-Soviet imagination into Eastern European areas has been observed in a number of British works of the mid-nineties from Ian Hamilton’s *The Last Shot* to Julian Barnes’ *The Porcupine* (see Bernd

the eccentric perspectives developed within both Germany and those ‘small regions’ at the core of Europe since the seventies, and acknowledged the cognate sense of instability which underlay the momentous shift to the post-communist phase.

It is symptomatic that despite its momentousness, 1989 was a date British poets handled quite tactfully, for all their shared impulse to the ‘documentary’ framing of history, and despite the considerable changes their imaginative horizon underwent. This eccentric strain of British poetry covered the high tide of the pre- to post-1989 transition: a period if any, which called for active witnessing and involvement, where events flew at a hectic pace, and the West could finally peep through the barrier. Yet the impact of History on their visions was much more restrained than it might be expected.

Tony Harrison, for example, might well cloak 1989 into the revolutionary framework handed down by Percy B. Shelley: ‘I would say that Ozymandias and the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, as the toppled Berlin Wall for us, were evidence of time overturning the tyrannies, an assurance that Prometheus would not suffer for ever’ (‘Fire and Poetry’, 261). Yet when he finally filmed and put into verse his journey across Eastern Europe in *Prometheus*,¹²⁹ the tyranny that most impressed the reporter, and stimulated the poet’s metahistorical vision, was the enduring engine of industrialism and its unrelenting stranglehold on a world unified by economic bonds – the shared weapon of two different tyrannies. Ken Smith’s response to 1989 and its aftermath was not, as we shall see, far from Harrison’s consideration, deep though his involvement with the effect of tyrannies was. In his ‘untimely’ prose reportage *Berlin: Coming in from the Cold* (1990), Smith managed to capture how 1989 was to become a watershed in recent history; but his testimony was filtered by a cautious attempt to frame the events, first by including sketches from the pre-1989 past, and secondly by correcting the Western, retrospectively deterministic image of the revolutionary implosion into one fitter to the eastern standpoint:

These were the events known in the East as the *Wende*, the turning, the change.
The *Durchbruch* is a Western image, seen from a Western perspective, the

Lenz, ‘The Last Shot’ in Houswitschka and Hallberg, *Literary Views*, pp. 65-87). The major representative of this strain is in fact, John Le Carré, who in the spy novel *Our Game* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995) updated his consolidated psychological thriller patterns.

¹²⁹ Tony Harrison, *Prometheus* (Manchester: Bloodaxe, 1998).

prisoners breaking out of the jail. But for the East the struggle culminating in the end of the Honecker regime constitutes the focus of history.¹³⁰

This resistance to Western reading patterns voiced the need to see how not just Germany, but Eastern Europe as a whole would reap the harvest of revolutions. Smith's vision was hopeful but distrustful: the 1989 fight for freedom was both captured and debunked, qualifying, for example, the liberation image with a reference to the 'fake' Romanian revolution of 1989.

Far from idiosyncratic, such a low-key approach to the otherwise iconic framing of 1989 in the West is indicative of a specifically intellectual mood that surrounded the 1989 events: if these partly helped to reconfigure the engrained, negative topography of Eastern tyranny in the Western imagination (Budapest, Prague and Danzig respectively) the fear of the possible return of equally strong autocracies was always there at the turn of the decade.¹³¹

This debunking of the 'sacred' moment of 1989 acquired a peculiar meaning in poetry, broadening its distance from other genres. Several dramatists were eventually drawn to tackle the ambiguous overthrow of power in the most problematic 'post-communist' realities, like Romania and Russia.¹³² British novelists shared instead poets' interest in Eastern Europe's closer regions. However, they mostly ignored '1989' to re-encode the post-Wall world into newly-cast dichotomic views, where political and economic corruption became the cipher of liberated Eastern Europe. This is why, as Ludmilla Kostova claims,

although the dismantlement of totalitarian regimes in 1989 and the early 90s was initially perceived as a very major historical shift, Western interest in it waned fairly soon. The literary and cinematic outcrop engendered by that interest therefore appears rather scanty from a twenty-first century perspective.¹³³

In poetry, the non-incidence of '1989' seemed instead consistent with a specific historical sensitivity: adhering to the revolution/liberation pattern was felt as less stimulating than

¹³⁰ Ken Smith, *Berlin: Coming in from the Cold* (London: Penguin, 1990; hereafter *Berlin*), p.59.

¹³¹ Günter Kunert, Untitled essay, *Granta 30: New Europe!* (1990), pp. 129-132.

¹³² In the early post-Wall age, a number of plays was actually devoted to the political upheavals in Russia and in delicate areas like Romania, from Howard Brenton's and Tariq Ali's *Moscow Gold* (1990) to Richard Nelson's and Alexander Gelman's *Misha's Party* (1993), to Michael Wicherek's *Romania's Baby* (1993).

¹³³ Ludmilla Kostova, 'Malcolm Bradbury's *To The Hermitage*: Fiction, History, and the East/West Divide', *Trans* 16 (April 2006). Track: Bradbury < http://www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/05_6/kostova.htm > [27 Nov. 2007].

interpreting the transition to the post-communist age, its various drifts and the necessary retrospective movement it implied. Rather than the 1989 fracture, what haunted British writers was the vacuum that followed the 1989 upheavals,¹³⁴ which the intellectual debate had largely foreshadowed and which was filled with questions regarding the Eastern countries' inclusion into Europe.

Tracking European history was primarily a tentative step to engage with the perspectives brought about by the historical shift in the East and to foreground the deconstruction of self-perceptions the communist phase had forged. Against this kind of oppression, not just politicians and the civil society, but intellectuals and even the most non-committed poets on the other side of the curtain had fought all along, resisting what Szirtes called the 'tyranny by [which] they understood state control of the imagination.'¹³⁵ For Szirtes, whose exploration of memory in 'The Photographer in Winter', is introduced by a passage from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, how the past controls the future, and the future controls the past was no moot question. If Western Europe had still to face unresolved questions, this was even truer of Hungary and Eastern Europe. The past had to be recharted and the distance Cold War culture had cultivated had to be fought and cancelled.

In this respect, poetry and fiction diverged radically. The tendency to construe the former Eastern bloc as a privileged space for alterity has actually been identified as the landmark of British literary post-Wall discourse at large, where it resumed, rather than disrupting, the looking-glass dynamics which was part of the high Cold War and *détente's* ideological

134 Referring to the 'integrated core' of Central-Eastern Europe, historians have recently introduced the term 'refolutions' in order to stress the balance between internal reforms of the various regimes and radical shifts towards forms of liberal democratic representation and re-organisation of civil society and of the welfare state. The fall of communism in countries like Romania, where 1989 triggered a sort of momentary involution (or regions like the Balkans whose post-Wall history is closer to that of the former USSR than to Central Europe) is inscribed into different interpretive frameworks, requiring a specific definition of 'revolutionary' and 'counter-revolutionary' trends. See Jacques Rupnik, 'On Two Modes of Exit from Communism: Central Europe and the Balkans', in *Between Past and Future: the Revolutions of 1989 and their Aftermath* ed. by Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), pp. 14-24.

¹³⁵ George Szirtes, e-mail to the author. 10 July 2007. Republished on George Szirtes website. Track: Szirtes, Weöres. <<http://www.georgeszirtes.co.uk/notes.html>> [10 July 2007].

armoury.¹³⁶ Though there is a general gap between the routes trodden by poetry and fiction, most of which has flourished since the mid-nineties, the writers' contents and approaches have also diverged. Disorder, barbarism, lack of political and above all economic achievement have so far loomed large in the fictional representations of an often indistinct 'ex Soviet(ized) bloc'. Some 'epoch-making changes' which have taken place since 1989 have, predictably enough, strengthened this interpretive approach. As both Maria Todorova and Vesna Goldsworthy point out, the image of a ravaged, corrupt USSR has characteristically and obliquely merged with the increasingly visible images of the Balkans, whereas the small regions in between are at best condensed into the enduring, untarnished stereotype of Ruritania.¹³⁷ The mood through which during the Cold War 'the West perceived the Eastern nightmare as tragedy and described it in dystopias'¹³⁸ has either survived or been replaced by an ironic, even comic stance. The 'Wild East' has become a topos of post-Wall representations¹³⁹ and the fictional homogenisation of the historical and cultural landscapes of the East has assured a rather oblique focus on the present: if not forgotten, the past has been momentarily outfocussed.¹⁴⁰

Though holding back from a radical socio-political understanding of spaces and places, British poetry detached itself from this kind of misrepresentation, as well as from the lurking Cold War backbone underlying it. Not only did poets hold back from re-inventing 'Ruritania',

¹³⁶ On this general approach to post-Wall discourse, see Houswitschka and Hallberg, *Literary Views*, pp. 24-49 and Vianu, *Desperado Age*, pp. 44-61

¹³⁷ See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. I-XI and Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). The notion of a post-Wall 'Ruritania' refers to literary works relating to the legacy of Anthony Hope's novels and especially his 1894 breakthrough novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* whose fortune after a century was still well established in both popular and more specifically literary imagination. In Goldsworthy's reading, Hope's original Ruritania, an invented kingdom, located somewhere between Germany and 'Eastern Europe', has been re-adapted to the post-1989 context of Central Europe caught between the aftermath of autocratic rule and the reality of ethnic and international struggle.

¹³⁸ Lidia Vianu, *Desperado Age*, p. 60.

¹³⁹ The notion of 'Wild East' is a recent literary coinage by Boris Fisherman, editor of *Wild East: Stories from the Last Frontier* (New York: Random House, 2003), an anthology which gathers a series of sketches or despatches from a rather vast East, stretching from the Czech Republic to Russia and Ukraine.

¹⁴⁰ In fiction, a focus on great historical events (the fall of Moscow, the Balkans, tensions at the borders of the former Soviet empire) has gone along with a focus on the metropolitan context where cross-cultural meeting between East and West is possible: a recurring pattern of fictional travelling across Central-Eastern Europe pivots therefore on the swiftly changing and unfathomable facades of big cities like Prague, Budapest and Kiev, rather than on the more marginal places explored by poetry.

they also framed the emergent Eastern scenarios as a separate historical space, different yet not in the least cut off from its former Western counterpart. The fact that poetry developed during the pre-wall to the post-Wall transition accounts, of course, for much of its distance from fiction. As it moved away from ‘the’ Cold War Other, Russia, and refrained from a balkanized idea of the East, poetry proved consonant with self-images developed by the countries of Central-Eastern Europe.

These images were, above all, ‘European’, a word which is crucial to Heaney’s appreciation of Miłosz and of his fellow-writers as it is to George Szirtes’ remarks about European poetry. Szirtes was not alone in supporting this perspective on the post-Wall world: Harrison’s ghastly sweep across Europe in the filmic transposition of his 1991 poem ‘The Gaze of the Gorgon’,¹⁴¹ has the ‘protagonist’ – a statue of the Jewish German poet Heinrich Heine – travel across Europe from Germany to the Balkans, ideally pointing to the symbolic overthrowing of tyrants on the whole European soil across the decades and foreshadowing the haunting presence of unifying memories. Harrison also responded to the underlying post-Wall doubt whether a shared Europe existed, and if so, what the re-integration of its Central and Eastern regions might determine in Europe’s post-1989 cultural consciousness. As is true also with Szirtes, his poetic journeys were an indirect recognition of Heaney’s intuition in *The Government of the Tongue*: when contemporary conflicts in Great Britain threatened to reinforce its isolation, poetry could break through ‘England’s island status, its off-centre European position, conditions that [had] ensured a protracted life within the English psyche for the assumption that a possible and even desirable congruence exist between domestic and imagined reality.’¹⁴²

II.2 British writers and editors against the ‘Splendid Isolation’

¹⁴¹ Tony Harrison, ‘The Gaze of the Gorgon’ in *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992; hereafter *Gaze*), pp. 57-75.

¹⁴² Seamus Heaney, *Governement of the Tongue*, p. 41.

The attempt to reach out at Europe and the attention to its re-emergence around 1989¹⁴³ was British poetry's most radical contribution to the representation of the former Eastern bloc, its major departure from the notion of an inchoate ex-Sovietised land and a distinctive move away from 'domestic concerns'. This attempt chimed with apprehensions voiced by British post-wall historians *ante litteram*, such as Norman Davies, who reached back to the forward march initiated by Eastern European intellectuals as early as the seventies to underline the convergence of historical strains between East and West:

I think I was very moved by what Vaclav Havel called 'the return to Europe.' Half a continent which had been artificially isolated from its neighbours for two or three generations came back to the fold [...] I was very aware of the necessity to raise one's eyes above the former Iron Curtain and to see the common threads which had been very strong. [...] There's no doubt that the legacy of the division is still very strong, the legacy of the Iron Curtain is still very strong. People's minds change slower than geographical maps.¹⁴⁴

Looking at the early work of Fenton, and the mid-eighties experiments of Szirtes, it might be tempting to claim that the poets' minds changed slightly faster than geographical maps. But since their concern with Eastern Europe – including the southern and far eastern regions which were increasingly perceived as distant – culminated between 1989 and 2000, it is important to underline that poetry responded to Central-Eastern Europe's 'return' when this region came concretely to surface again. This process was, however, foreshadowed by the oblique re-emersion of this region to the literate and more generally cultural consciousness of the eighties: Great Britain's role in the process was, for once, not ancillary to that played by the continent or to the USA, which from the outset had been the traditional interlocutors of intellectual movements supporting the 'Eastern cause'.

Heaney's concern with the Central and Eastern European writers' responsibility towards history owed much to views articulated during the transition when in fact, the question whether

¹⁴³ About the ambivalent notion of 'European unification', the intertwining of cultural definitions with programmatic, political perspectives, see Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993), pp.379-410.

¹⁴⁴ Norman Davies, 'Interview with John Tusa' *The John Tusa Interviews*, BBC radio 3, 15 November 1996; transcript available at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/jonhtusainterviews/davies.shhtml>> [16 January 2008].

‘Central and Eastern Europe existed’ or not, patently emerged.¹⁴⁵ The widespread contention that it did, and that its experience was in fact pivotal to the historical consciousness of Europe as such, was probably most clearly aired as early as 1983 by the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, by then a mouthpiece of extra-bloc cultural and political relations of the eighties. Kundera was thinking in terms of Europe, and his controversial essay ‘Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l’Europe Centrale’ appealed to a wide, international readership, not confined to the continent where Eastern European writers had a privileged, though often difficult, exposure. Kundera’s original essay re-appeared in fact on the pages of *Granta*, under the more eloquent title ‘A Kidnapped West, or Culture Bows Out’.¹⁴⁶ In it, Kundera radicalised a discourse over ‘Europe’ by bluntly dismissing Cold War political dichotomies. Foregrounding the paradigmatic historical experience of central Europe, he defined its oppressed condition and its perpetually shifting boundaries as its distinctive features:

Central Europe can therefore not be defined and determined by political frontiers (which are inauthentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests, and occupations), but by the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition.¹⁴⁷

The notion of a kidnapped Central-Eastern Europe laid of course a specific stress on Eastern Europe’s autonomous status. Kundera’s well-timed article captured the gist of the mid-eighties. His essay was highly critical of Cold War divisions, and yet the generic ‘realm’ envisaged by Kundera was at odds with the rising nationalisms which buttressed the resistance to the ‘communist’ identity before and after 1989. Predictably enough, as the post-Wall rearticulation took place, this instrumental notion of ‘Central-Eastern Europe’ lost its grip and was eclipsed by the turmoil of the nineties.

¹⁴⁵ Two essays by Timothy Garton Ash provide a further frame to the radical agendas of supporters of the Central-European stance before and after 1989: ‘Does Central Europe exist?’ (*The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, London: Penguin, 1989, pp.161-91) and ‘Where is Central Europe now?’ (*History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Despatches from Europe in the 1990s*, London: Allen Lane 1999, pp.383-97).

¹⁴⁶ Milan Kundera, ‘A kidnapped West, or culture bows out’, *Granta* 11 (1984), pp. 95-118. The original article, ‘Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l’Europe Centrale’, was published in *Le Débat* 27 (1983), pp. 1-22

¹⁴⁷ Milan Kundera, ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’, p. 220.

On the cross-cultural literary scene, however, the notion did not wane. The concept of a displaced core of Europe transited from a broadly political domain back to the cultural and literary ground which had, in fact, contributed to shape it but which received a new stimulus from the region's effective appearance. In Britain no less than on the continent, 'Central Eastern Europe' became a region of contemporary historical imagination, which poetry more than any other genre helped preserve. Not only did Heaney's idea of 'Central-Eastern European countries', borrowed from Miłosz, become common currency between the seventies and the eighties, but poets and editors continued to cling to this notion well into the post-1989 age.

In the preface of the first post-Wall anthology devoted to Central and Eastern Europe, *The Poetry of Survival* (1991), Daniel Weissbort put literary interest in Central and Eastern Europe and political concern with Europe's new status on a level:

The writers who, through the difficult and even tragic times, continued to keep distinctions alive, to insist on individual values in the face of collectivist pressures, and finally sheer incompetence of rulers surely played an essential part (as they have periodically done throughout the troubled history of Central Europe) in educating, inspiring, and finally empowering the reformers.¹⁴⁸

However, his anthology pitted the Eastern countries' recent historical heritage against new geopolitical remappings. Including Germany and Yugoslavia, it gathered poets whose only common denominator was historical rather geographic: what they all had experienced and 'survived' was Nazism, the advent of Communism and in most cases, displacement from their native countries. In Weissbort's view, theirs was an imagined kind of Europe, long denied by Cold War views, yet relevant to the English speaking world – or given the editor's 'non-aligned' bias, to Britain no less than to the USA. By the late eighties (when the anthology was compiled), the historical

¹⁴⁸ Daniel Weissbort, 'Preface' to *The Poetry of Survival: Post-war Poets of Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Anvil, 1991), p.15. The selection implied a geographically wider notion of Central and Eastern Europe than political discourse of the early nineties would concede. Poland, former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and most significantly Germany and some Yugoslavian countries (Serbia and Croatia) featured in the anthology as they had done before 1989. Weissbort's choice was certainly motivated by his long training in *MPT* and his participation to events like Poetry International, where Central Eastern European poets had enjoyed remarkable success.

consciousness which retroactively kept this region compact and alive was yet to be fully explored; the claims it laid on European identity were, however, perceived as quite urgent.

Such a deliberately loose idea of Central and Eastern Europe as a cultural region did not fail to provoke heated debate: the need to focus on aesthetic, historical and geographical specificities underlay, for example, Donald Davie's objection to the alleged transitivity of Eastern European poets' 'messages'.¹⁴⁹ Yet the viability of this notion in the 'former' West and its persistence rested precisely on the unifying vision supported by intellectuals like Kundera, who stressed the paradoxical legacy History had bequeathed on Central and Eastern Europe:

Central Europe as a family of small nations has its own vision of the world a vision based on a deep distrust of history. History, that goddess of Hegel and Marx, that incarnation of reason that judges us and arbitrates our fate, that is the history of conquerers. The people of Central Europe are not conquerers. They cannot be separated from European history; they cannot exist outside it; but they represent the wrong side of this history, they are its victims and outsiders.¹⁵⁰

This kind of Benjaminian approach to the snares of historicism¹⁵¹ permeated intellectuals who consciously brought the East and its 'outsider' status back to the European orbit. In this respect, Miłosz' mediating role proved as complex as Kundera's. Miłosz' predicaments about Eastern Europe's 'return' were deeply fraught with ideas he had developed long before, in his influential essay *The Captive Mind*.¹⁵² Though deeply anti-totalitarian, *The Captive Mind* was not only a thorough assault on 'real existing socialism', which he condemned while powerfully laying bare its lures; it was a biting critique of the historical necessity with which modern regimes cloaked their programmatic lies. Totalitarianism was also, in Miłosz' view, the hypertrophic extension of any kind of modern power which, for the sake of progress and of civilisation, destroys and distorts the past as well as the present. This critical note was struck by Miłosz over and over again, not just through his essays but through his poetry. The 1948 poem which Heaney quoted

¹⁴⁹ See Adam Czerniawski, 'Interview with Donald Davie', *Thumbscrew* 4 (1996), pp. 23-30.

¹⁵⁰ Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Central Europe', p.221.

¹⁵¹ See Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 255-66.

¹⁵² Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1953).

in his lectures – almost a poetic version of *The Captive Mind* – was probably the best illustration of Eastern European experience in ‘survival’. Provokingly titled ‘Child of Europe’, it uses words to express the very way an individual, or a people, might be held captive and made complicit by a language denying historical experience and the factual world:

Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision.
Then burn the house down to fulfil the prediction.
Grow your tree of falsehood from a small grain of truth.
[...]
He who invokes history is always secure.
The dead will not rise to witness against him.¹⁵³

Through his work, Miłosz was not just criticizing communist Poland, which he abandoned in the post-war years. While pointing to the obnoxious effect of the ‘gods of Marx and Hegel’ within regions that never recovered from the interwar magmatic vacuum and the disasters of the Second World War, he aimed, like Kundera, at a vaster target:

My intention was to depict a worldwide phenomenon, not a local, Polish one. Poland exemplifies it. [...] Later on, in various essays and books, I tried to reach the source of the entire issue of communism in the twentieth century, the older sources, touching on the philosophical current that can be studied by going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century: Hegel, the fascination of historicity.¹⁵⁴

In the post-war world he unveiled while writing ‘Child of Europe’, Miłosz warned the West against expunging its recent historical legacy as mere aberration and against relegating ‘evil’ beyond the Iron Curtain. When he renewed his appeal in the eighties, however, it was basically because his doubts had proved, after all, well-founded.

Like Kundera, Miłosz took pains to remind the ‘West’ of Eastern Europe, of the provisionality of political borders and the importance of regions, of peoples whose ‘disappearance remained invisible.’¹⁵⁵ If the East envisaged by both intellectuals was looking forward, it was also looking back and to the West: its haunted histories illuminated the dark side

¹⁵³ Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), p. 85.

¹⁵⁴ Ewa Czarneka and Aleksander Fiut, *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz* (Jovanovich: Harcourt Brace, 1987), p.147.

¹⁵⁵ Milan Kundera, ‘The Tragedy of Eastern Europe’, p. 220. See also Czesław Miłosz, ‘Starting from my Europe’ in *The Witness of Poetry*, pp. 3-20.

of European history, whose recession in European cultural memory had been secured by the existence of a non democratic ‘Other’. The appeal was urgent as the end of the Cold War drew near, since as Tony Judt remarks, ‘to many Western European intellectuals, Communism was a failed variant of a common progressive heritage.’¹⁵⁶

As a part of the fruitful intellectual response to Eastern Europe’s emergence, the flourishing of poetry in translation shed light on European loose-knit historical consciousness; at the same time, Western poets, critics, editors could assess the relation between poetry and the ‘meta-historical’ core inherent in the notion of ‘Eastern and Central Europe’. In keeping with continental trends, the British literary landscape was actually deeply affected by what Heaney called ‘the impact of translation[s]’ from Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁵⁷ Although the target of this impact was mostly his generation, Heaney’s readings brought into question far-reaching historical perceptions onto which younger writers such as Harrison, Smith and Szirtes grafted their own ‘Europe’.

Heaney’s appreciation of Eastern European poets might have looked partisan: younger poets, amongst whom James Fenton, voiced sceptical responses to this kind of allegiance.¹⁵⁸ But Heaney’s political sensitivity, sharpened by conflicts which pierced through the highly derealising dimension of ‘cold’, unfought wars, allowed him to grasp the deep-rooted aspects of Central Eastern Europe’s role within British historical imagination. By restricting the wider historical references implicit in Kundera’s reflection to recent twentieth century history, he could actually fathom the power Central Eastern poetry drew from responding to historical fractures and disjunctions concerning the whole Europe. More crucially, he could contrast the moral offence which attended the sense of ‘survival’ and balanced the enjoyment of full lyricism in Eastern poetry with the experience of Anglo-American mid-century poets. The latter, in Heaney’s view,

testified at different moments and in different registers [...] to the horror and fury of the war, [but] did so with an unbroken historical nerve. The war may have

¹⁵⁶ Judt, *Post-War*, p. 573.

¹⁵⁷ Heaney, ‘The Impact of Translation’, in *Government of the Tongue*, pp.36-44.

¹⁵⁸ See James Fenton, ‘The Orpheus of Ulster’, in *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.85-102, p. 100.

made as great a gap in their sense of human nature as bombs made in cities, but the poetic tradition inside which they worked cushioned the blast.¹⁵⁹

His receptivity to the different historical sensibility pervading poetry on the other side of the Curtain allowed Heaney to grasp the double pull of Central-Eastern European self-definition voiced by intellectuals who addressed the West: their willingness to highlight Eastern Europe's history and their parallel attempt to create a unified perspective, emphasising its paradigmatic value. Both pulls had, to some extent, been catalysed by critical trends endorsed by editors and translators, in the fifteen years that preceded 1989.¹⁶⁰

A radical steering away from the established paths of Cold War cultural politics had actually emerged against the backdrop of the seventies' unstable *détente* when the rising concern with 'dissident' Eastern European writers disentangled itself from the well-rooted concern with Russian poetry. Heaney's ideal conflation of 'Russian and Eastern European' voices disguised, in fact, a dissociation which his lectures otherwise reflected.¹⁶¹ From the post-war age onwards, early twentieth-century Russian poetry – the high season of modernism epitomised by Osip Mandelstam, Anna Achmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva – had almost established a canon of anti-totalitarian 'poetry of resistance'. Adequately filtered by the Gulag-Archipelago effect, in the seventies this canon provided a further backlash on the Western intellectual enchantment with communism, in the USA no less than on the continent.¹⁶² This concern worked, as Adam Piette suggests, as a weapon through which many writers 'took their cue from the non-aligned dissident communities in the Soviet Union and America [...] to disengage from the ideological

¹⁵⁹ Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁰ From the late sixties onwards, series like *Modern Poetry in Translation* and reviews like *Stand* have kept a special focus on poetry from Eastern European countries. Between the eighties and nineties (despite the ten-year-long suspension of *Modern Poetry*) the trend increased: comprehensive excursions into Central and Eastern European writing appeared in *Stand*, *Poetry Review* and *Poetry London*, whereas Czech, Polish, ex-Yugoslavian, Hungarian and Rumanian poets have been individually translated.

¹⁶¹ In *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney's ambiguous association of 'writers in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries' (p.xvi) is in fact not really maintained; Heaney's essay on the Russian dissident poet Osip Mandelstam is related to those devoted to East European poets (Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert and Vasko Popa) on the basis of Heaney's metapoetic reflection rather than on political factors.

¹⁶² On the geographical map of European debates on communism and dissidence, see Judt, *Post-War*, pp. 197-225.

quagmire.¹⁶³ On both the American and the British poetic scenes this interest never quite expired; on the contrary, it was visibly rekindled in the early eighties.¹⁶⁴ Between the seventies and the eighties, however, British editors, translators and poets fostered and re-oriented this kind of non-alignment by foregrounding a separate cluster of Eastern European writers.

Though partially covering the generation parallel to Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva (the first influential twentieth-century generation), the focus of British intellectuals shifted to the following (or 'second') generation, which was recognised as a sort of transnational league coming from both the Eastern bloc countries and Yugoslavia. Amongst these Central-Eastern European voices were poets who had long been familiar to the continental and to the Anglo-American readership, as well as quite unknown names: Tadeusz Różewicz, Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert (second Polish generation); Attila József, Gyula Illyés, Janos Pilinszky (first and second Hungarian generation); Vladimír Hólan and Miloš Holub (first and second Czechoslovakian generation); Miroslav Krleža, Slavko Mihalić and Vasko Popa (first and second Yugoslavian generation), Bertolt Brecht, Günter Kunert and Hans Magnus Enzensberger (first and second German generation). This emergence shed light on a 'group' of writers who represented 'an unconscious part of a general world consciousness' as Miroslav Holub put it.¹⁶⁵ The process was therefore important: in the first place, it secured the transition of 'Central-Eastern Europe' from the ideological context of the mid-eighties to the post-Wall literary and intellectual scene, where this 'region' of the historical and literate consciousness was partially redrawn. In the second place, it eradicated a kind of ambiguity which, far from promoting the cause of Central Eastern Europe, might have hindered it.

¹⁶³ Piette, 'Cold War Poetry', p.650.

¹⁶⁴ Throughout the Cold War period and the post-Wall age, the unabated success of Russian twentieth century poetry might be observed by the flourishing of anthologies as well as of individual collections. Between the mid-seventies and the nineties, a number of works was published, from Tom Riley's translations of Mandelstam (*Collected Works*, 1980) to Elaine Feinstein's translations of Marina Tsvetaeva's (*Selected Poems*, 1989). Translation of Russian women poets represented in fact a distinctive strain, somehow parallel to the emergence of 'women poetry' in the mainstream of the eighties.

¹⁶⁵ Miroslav Holub, 'In conversation with Daniel Weissbort', in *The Poetry of Survival*, ed. by Weissbort, pp. 313-322, p. 316.

During the high Cold War, to talk about ‘poets from the Warsaw Pact countries’ implied a degree of abstraction possibly as great as that required by the later notion of ‘Eastern European poetry.’ The most important representatives of Eastern European poetry had achieved their maturity during the Second World War and under the early communist phase. The conflation of Russian modernism and post-War Eastern European modernism in the first, pioneering editions of *Modern Poetry in Translation* or in the early seventies issues of *Stand*, had therefore represented an important, but misleading, incursion into the world behind the Iron Curtain. Not only was there a huge temporal, cultural and political gap between these two literary trends; this gap tended to widen significantly over the twenty years that followed. Well after the sixties, when English translations had just started to appear, most Eastern European writers were addressed as dissident. Yet the term ‘dissident’, almost a trademark for the intellectual status of Soviet bloc intellectuals who had experienced communism, hardly fitted the stance endorsed by Miłosz, Janos Pilinszky or Vasko Popa – just to mention some of the (then) living poets with which British audiences were quite familiar by the eighties. Only the Czech Miroslav Holub was, in this respect, defying communist censors between the late sixties and the nineties and was accordingly regarded as ‘perhaps the last of the great generation of modernists who found poetry in the counterpoint between freedom of thought and the restrictions of system and state.’¹⁶⁶

Whereas Eastern European poetry could not be as easily framed within Cold War politics as Russian poetry was for a while, it allowed readers to engage problematically with the specific historical heritage this poetry guarded, in the very moment when Eastern European countries became more visible to the Western audience and central to ‘European’ debates. As Heaney’s lectures made apparent, Eastern poets’ fame rested equally on the historical situation they came to face, the worldview they could vindicate, and the somewhat exemplary status they embodied, which might be regarded as complementary to the ‘paradigmatic’ status British intellectuals ascribed to Eastern countries. All three aspects informed ways through which Eastern Europe emerged through the politics of poetry in translation.

¹⁶⁶ Elaine Feinstein and George Szirtes, ‘Miroslav Holub’, *Poetry Review* 88:4 (1998), 57-59, p. 58.

Under the heading ‘Central-Eastern European writers’ were often listed not only the older poets who ‘had survived empires and the devastating march of history’¹⁶⁷ in the first half of the twentieth century, but the generation born between the tens and the twenties. This generation experienced the Second World War and witnessed the arbitrary re-configuration of a huge part of the former empires under the Soviet rule or within the non-aligned entity of Yugoslavia; it also registered the dissemination and the disappearance of entire communities and minorities from European multicultural texture. For them Sovietisation – or non-alignment, in the case of Yugoslavia – had followed the experience of Nazism ‘with minimal transitional disruption’.¹⁶⁸ The fact that mid-twentieth century history angled their worldview was the feature which most impressed their Western and British readers.

The testimonial burden these poets carried along was heavy indeed. As the individual poets’ most promoted works reveal, this burden stretched from Czesław Miłosz’ challenging witness to Nazi and Soviet occupation (central to his translated poems since the early seventies), to Vasko Popa’s fable-like translation of the epic and doomed history of Serbian Banat (since *Earth Erect*, 1972 to the eighties collections), to Janos Pilinszky’s testimony of the horror of Nazism in Hungary (his 1976 *Desert of Love* was reprinted in 1989).¹⁶⁹ Uncomfortable for the various regimes in the East, their memories were not less shocking for the West. The resistance of regroupings based on these poets’ shared experiences, apparent in Weissbort’s anthology, confirmed the intersection of pre-Wall conceptual configurations of Eastern Europe with the post-Wall European memorial urge.

An interesting slippage occurred, however, between the cultural emergence of Eastern Europe through poetic translation and its actual re-emergence as a ‘haunted land’ and an area circumscribed by volatile borders. Before the Wall came down and British poets merged their response to memory with the impulse to discover ‘the other half of Europe’, Eastern European intellectual redefinition had gradually become central to the reception of Eastern European

¹⁶⁷ Milan Kundera, ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’, p. 221.

¹⁶⁸ Tony Judt, *Post-War*, p.193.

¹⁶⁹ See Vasko Popa, *Earth Erect* (trans. Anne Pennington, London: Anvil, 1972) and *Homage to the Lame Wolf* (trans. Charles Simic, Oberlin: Field Translation Series, 1979); Janos Pilinszky, *The Desert of Love* (trans. Janos Csokits and Ted Hughes, London: Anvil, [1976], 1989).

poetry in Britain. Apart from its historical value, Central Eastern European poetry impressed more and more British readers for its distinctive ‘mood’. Again, this was the result of British poets’ and editors’ sensitivity to definitions fostered by their interlocutors; the very notion of survival, central to Heaney and later on to Weissbort, was recurrently stressed by Miłosz:

It is possible that the Western branch of civilisation disintegrates because it creates, and creates because it disintegrates [...] The exceptional quality of the twentieth century is not determined by jets as a means of transportation or a decrease in infant mortality or the birth control pill. It is determined by humanity’s emergence as a new elemental force.¹⁷⁰

Miłosz’ view of post-war Polish poetry as drawing from ‘biological resistance’ to man’s own crimes, chimed with claims voiced since the height of the Cold War, according to which not only Polish poetry, but a whole generation of mid-European poets was fatally

reinforced by everything that had happened [since Nazism and WWII], to their countries in particular and in some measure (more than ever before) to human beings in general. Circumstantial proof that man is a political animal, a state numeral, as if it needed to be proofed, has been weighed out in dead bodies by the million. The attempt these poets have made to record man’s awareness of what is being done to him, by his own institutions and by history, and to record along with the suffering their inner creative transcendence of it, has brought their poetry down to such precisions, discriminations and humilities that it is a new thing. It seems closer to the common reality, in which we have to live if we are to survive, than to those other realities in which we can holiday ...¹⁷¹

Heaney’s contemporary, Ted Hughes, first laid bare the spellbinding ‘Eastern feel’; his remarks, included in his 1969 essay on Vasko Popa, dramatised quite interestingly the tension between Eastern European worldview and British ‘poetic’ distance from history (‘man’s awareness of what *is being done* to him’). If this distance was scarcely identifiable with the modernist replacement of history with cultural-literary history, it was certainly imbued with the post-war and Cold War eschatology through which A. Alvarez had invoked the twentieth-century ‘forces

¹⁷⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, pp. 107-8.

¹⁷¹ Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), pp. 220-1.

of disintegration' eight years before.¹⁷² Still, Hughes' emphasis on elemental humanity foreshadowed the gist of Miłosz' and Heaney's later criticism: by weighing the tale of human progress (Alvarez' 'old standards of civilisation') against the cruelty and frailty of man in recent history, the Eastern European generation on which they all concentrated had struck a note which echoed through the following decades. In these poets' reading, Eastern European 'distrust towards history' turned into a recognisable, moral tune. Before this region stepped into British poetry carrying with it its historical burden and the tensions that attended and superseded its liberation, poetry in translation secured then the appeal of 'Eastern Europe' and of its morally challenging 'escape' from history itself.

II.3 Fables of freedom

Starting from his poetic experience, Miroslav Holub hinted at a key structure of feeling which the voices of Central and Eastern Europe shared and which came to be identified as an enduring landmark of their poetry:

references to personal historical events [can] be extroverted into a sort of stylisation of history, which is far from a personal diary [...] This is a common experience in the East, compression, or experience of the general compression.¹⁷³

Holub's remark chimes with an argument recently raised by George Szirtes, who applies the distinction of 'story' and 'fable' (or pattern) to the notion of personal and collective history as narrative. Szirtes' remark is interesting, as it refers to Heaney's concept of poetry as 'the music of what happens' and borrows from Edwin Muir, the poet Heaney himself regarded as grafting an eschatological and archetypal vision onto the disruptions of the twentieth century:

¹⁷² A. Alvarez, 'The New Poetry, or Beyond the Gentility Principle', Introduction to *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 21-32, p. 26.

¹⁷³ Miroslav Holub, 'In conversation with Daniel Weissbort', p. 316.

In his *Autobiography*, the Scottish poet Edwin Muir makes a distinction between the story and fable of his own life. The *story*, he says, is what he tells us; the fable is the sense he makes of it, its archaic echo with myth [...] I want to think of Muir's original idea of the *story* as more or less what happens, and the *fable* as its music.¹⁷⁴

To some extent, this distinction might provide a reading key to the twofold nature of Eastern Europe's impact on the British poetic scene. Shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the attitudes towards Eastern Europe displayed, respectively, by the British politics of translation and by autochthonous British poetry might be seen as the effects of two complementary interests. The former revolved on the 'fables' through which Eastern European writers had condensed history, whereas the latter was increasingly being drawn to the stories which had inspired those writers and which the West was finally starting to face.

When around the mid-eighties the historical anamnesis carried out all over Europe substantiated the testimonial value of Eastern poetry, the moral, political and didactic purport inherent in poetic 'stylisation' took centre stage in the critical discussions animating the British scene. Of course, this depended on the kind of questions raised by writers and translators in Britain, and particularly those of Heaney's and Hughes' generation. The articulation of an ethic predicament on the part of poets who did not ignore history and spoke thoroughly to their 'community', was increasingly regarded as a measure of their aesthetic freedom. No clearer attempt was made to stress the power of 'stylisation' of East European poetry than in *The Rattle Bag* (1985), an anthology edited by Heaney and Hughes.¹⁷⁵ In this miscellaneous work, only a few non-English voices counterpoint the dominant Anglo-American presence: amongst them, the most tonally consistent presence is represented by the Central-Eastern European generation which was the focus of both editors.

Despite the loose and wide-ranging spectrum of themes, registers and genres, the 'Eastern voice' stands out of the selection of poems which cover the second half of the twentieth century; its recognised historical legacy is, however, shadowed by a focus on its mood. The excision of

¹⁷⁴ George Szirtes, 'Fables of Home', *The Dublin Review* 5 (2002), 7-13, p.10.

¹⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, eds, *The Rattle Bag* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985).

the great voices of Polish modernism, traditionally more versed in the long narrative poem and in sequences which easily accommodate history, brings deliberately to the fore one of the paths pursued by Eastern European modernists like Holub, Vasko Popa and Janos Pilinszky; they appear here as interpreters of the esopic register which was recognised as a main trait of the writer's resistance to voicing politically 'orthodox' views. The dominant accent in the section reflects assessed views of Eastern European poets' aspiration to deliver 'universal messages', and more specifically, their ability to secrete a distinctively moral and political sap out of their 'personal diaries'. Their inclusion within the relative barren mid-century literary landscape (where their groundtone clashes with the raw 'realism' exhibited by the war poets) confirms their role as *the* moral voices of European poetry.

The section is made ideally compact by a shared, parabolic approach to history; this is seen as an a-teleological tale, as happens in Holub's 'The Fly' and 'A History Lesson';¹⁷⁶ or is condensed as the pitiless short-circuit of domination and subjugation in Vasko Popa's 'Nail', a provoking, demystifying 'lesson' about any self-styled democracy Janos Pilinszky's presence in the anthology seems, however, most telling. The singer of Nazi camps and persecutions, Pilinszky was a recognized representative of the Eastern testimonial line, the author of stories, rather than of patterns.¹⁷⁷ In *The Rattle Bag*, Pilinszky is nevertheless represented by a passage from his early and most acclaimed pieces, 'CZ Oratorio', a dramatic poem set in Buchenwald:¹⁷⁸

Once upon a time
there lived a lonely wolf
lonelier than angels.

He happened to come upon a village.

¹⁷⁶ *The Rattle Bag*, pp. 176, p. 201 and pp. 171-2.

¹⁷⁷ Amongst Pilinszky's most often anthologized poems are actually those which won him international acclaim when *The Desert of Love* was published: 'Harbach 1944', 'Frankfurt' and 'CZ Oratorio', where the slightly surreal overtones of his writing and his testimonial impulse are tightly bound up. See *The Poetry of Survival*, pp. 225-238 and Pilinszky's section in George Gömöri and George Szirtes eds, *The Colonnade of Teeth: Modern Hungarian Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), pp.118-27.

¹⁷⁸ Janos Pilinszky, 'Fable' in *The Rattle Bag*, p.157. The original version appeared in the very first edition of Pilinszky's *The Desert of Love*. In the original version, the 'fable' is told, *ex abruptu*, by one of the three speakers, who, having survived the concentration camp, now face the loneliness and unspeakability of what they have suffered. The fable makes another speaker suddenly realise that they are, in fact, dead (*Wustenei der Liebe/The Desert of Love*, Budapest: Holibri, 1992), pp. 69-82.

He fell in love with the first house he saw.
 Already he loved its walls,
 the caresses of its bricklayers.
 But the windows stopped him
 [...]
 So at night he went into the house.
 He stopped in the middle of the room
 and never moved from there anymore.

He stood open-eyed all through the night
 and on into the morning
 when he was beaten to death.

This version, present in other anthologies but here deprived of both epigraph and date, isolates and enhances the strength of the poem's pattern, which connects the animal and the human world without appealing to elemental forces of disintegration – a feature Ted Hughes, who helped to translate it, certainly appreciated having often concerned himself with the taboo figure of the wolf. Antiphrastically 'moral', the passage points to human agency as the unnamed evil irrupting into the world, a process which surfaces in the stringent necessity of the 'fable' (which is actually the title adopted by the translators).

However conceptually distinct from anthologies devoted to Central Eastern European poetry, the Eastern section in *The Rattle Bag* played very clearly the paradigmatic value of the literary 'history lesson' of Eastern Europe against the stories with which Eastern European writing was otherwise associated. Hughes' and Heaney's choice pointed then to a peculiar, and by no means exhaustive, intellectual side of British response to Central European voices as reflected by the politics of poetry in translation. Far from waning, this kind of reception was partly resumed by other poets who were closer to those featuring in the present survey. It was in fact demonstrated by James Fenton's and Ken Smith's friend Christopher Reid, whose collection *Katerina Brac* (1985)¹⁷⁹ was praised by Heaney in *The Government of the Tongue* lectures. *Katerina Brac* was the witty, self-reflexive re-appropriation of a supposedly 'Eastern' poetic mood on the part of a poet who shared in the widespread concern with cultural de-insulation. Reid seemed to engage

¹⁷⁹ Christopher Reid, *Katerina Brac* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985).

with Donald Davie's sceptical approach to the 'translatability' of Eastern European poetry; his response was to regard translation as a liberating way to bring 'the insular/vernacular/British imagination into more dramatic contact with the [...] wistful and literary after-image' of Central and Eastern Europe, as Heaney put it.¹⁸⁰ As a fictitious Eastern European poet, *Katerina* embodies the disenchantment with and the distance from officially recorded time ascribed to Central East European writing:

Every day, history takes place
 even when nothing happens.
 I believe these things should be written down
 and published in the metropolis
 as a matter of national pride.
 An eminent scholar must be assigned the task:
 not someone who scribbles little poems,
 but a lucid stylist,
 a practitioner of unambiguous prose.¹⁸¹

However, the very 'myth' of the Eastern poet 'under pressure' and the lack of any kind of factual representation of Eastern Europe make Reid's work emblematic of the cultural gap which the intellectual fascination with realities beyond the Wall threatened to widen. *Katerina Brac* is a 'voice' backed by no specific stories. 'Her' poetry rejects the 'unambiguous prose' non-democratic regimes impose on writers. Yet Reid's muffled lyricism relishes in the freedom acquired through 'translation' rather than pointing to the tensions animating dissident writers. As Sean O'Brien claims, 'the encoded condition of poetry under a dictatorship may lend an unearned sense of gravity to poems whose concerns have somehow [...] evaded full knowledge of the actual conditions.'¹⁸²

Historical consciousness, ironically decompressed by Reid, suddenly turned extremely loaded when Reid's contemporaries, Fenton, Harrison, Szirtes and Smith ventured in Eastern Europe between the eighties and the late nineties. The loose paths which they travelled and their differently articulated 'distance' betray the uneasiness of poetic experiences springing from the

¹⁸⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, p.41.

¹⁸¹ Reid, 'Annals' in *Katerina Brac*, p.17.

¹⁸² O'Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p. 229.

impulse to offer documents and reports from a region whose cultural image was paradoxically more familiar to the Western consciousness than its actual conditions. Their approach thus prevented them from providing a figurative counterpoint to the Eastern mood voiced by Reid and dissuaded them from trying their hands at ‘patterning’ history. Even Harrison and Smith, whose syncretic literary sympathies were partially directed to the mythical and the archetypal, discovered Europe primarily through their concern with ‘stories’.

In British poetry, the overlay between Eastern Europe as a region of historical consciousness and the swiftly changing post-Wall Europe resulted into two interlocking directions: one harked back to the region created by cross-cultural intellectual debate, as testified by the all-pervading presence of the Holocaust and the Second World War in Fenton, Harrison, Szirtes and to a less degree Smith; the other brought poets to tackle specific questions this new Europe posed to the West. On the one hand, the trajectory drawn by poetry adhered to the uneven emergence of areas and of ‘nations’, as the prominence of Poland, Hungary and Germany over less immediately integrated areas such as Romania or Bulgaria shows; on the other hand, Szirtes’ focus on Hungary and Transylvania, Fenton’s concentration on Eastern Germany and Harrison’s and Smith’s inclusion of the Balkan and Sub-Carpathian areas proposed a loosely knit European geography which ran much against the grain of dominant tendencies in European self-definition.

Despite the absence of specific literary affiliations between the British poets of the mid-eighties and nineties and the Eastern poets with whom British poetry in translation had engaged, the concern with living memories, with borders, with extraterritorial areas and peoples excluded by historical records substantiated the same need to be reconnected with history Eastern poets had been voicing. Pre-Wall politics of translation and reading patterns provide a canvas onto which Eastern European geographies were projected on British poetry. The effects of this region’s convergence to the West and of the gradual, relative escape from Cold War frameworks can be detected in the relatively broad representation devoted by British poets to Central and Eastern Europe as compared to the more filtered representation of Russia; even at the time of perestroika, representations of Russia were, in fact, radically harnessed to enduring cultural

mythologies framed in the high Cold War.¹⁸³ Despite the intense impact of translation, poets who chose Eastern Europe held back from using literary filters to frame their first-hand experience: references to Eastern European literature are scarce or totally absent in both Harrison and Smith, poets who nevertheless belonged to the Northern cultural circles which most promoted poetry in translation.¹⁸⁴ The specific case of Szirtes, whose activity as a translator took off in the nineties after the Hungarian experience portrayed in *Bridge Passages*, reveals however a kind of historical consciousness which connects him to his three fellow writers.¹⁸⁵

Szirtes focused on the emergence of literary Hungary in Britain, took an active interest in a range of Hungarian authors less familiar to the English-speaking public, and showed a peculiar concern with their historical background. Between 1986 and 1996, when debates over the 1956 failed Hungarian revolution moved from the pre-Wall oppositional debate to the post-1989 memorial reconstruction, Szirtes devoted a number of translations to the silenced voices of the ‘national’ and revolutionary cause in Hungary. His special tribute was probably his translation of one of the banned mid-century poems, Gyula Illyés’ ‘A Sentence on Tyranny’, a long reflection on minds held captive by oppressive regimes which closes on a disparaging mood:

Where tyranny obtains
everything is vain,
the song itself though fine
is false in every line,

¹⁸³ Carol Rumens, the representative of the women mainstream writing of the eighties, wrote a collection of prose sketches and poems inspired by her experience in St Petersburg in the late eighties. A companion piece to her translations from Mandelst’am, *The Greening of Snow Beach* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Bloodaxe, 1989) hinges on a Cold War repertoire where various topoi and figures (the dissident, the ‘worker’) of the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* nightmare are central.

¹⁸⁴ Since both writers worked for *Stand* in the seventies, Central Eastern European poets were certainly part of their reading. Nevertheless, neither Harrison nor Smith declared any special affiliation with Eastern poetry. As was the case with Szirtes, some authors were occasionally mentioned as interlocutors: Miroslav Holub and Andrej Voznesensky became, together with other activists and politicians, dedicatees of Harrison’s ‘Cold War’ sonnets (see ‘The Song of the PWD Man’ and ‘On the Spot’, *Collected Poems*, pp.44 and 109) whereas Smith quoted Brecht’s ‘The Solution’(1953) in the opening chapter of his prose reportage *Berlin* (p. 23).

¹⁸⁵ Szirtes’ groundbreaking anthology *The Colonnade of Teeth: Modern Hungarian Poetry* includes a number of translations of Hungarian poetry he has made since the late eighties: already *The Photographer in Winter* and *Metro* (1988) included some versions and translations of the great Hungarian voices who anticipated the post-war ‘poetry of survival’, Attila Jozef and Michael Radnoti, alongside younger voices (*Photographer in Winter* pp.51-5, *Metro* p.25). *The Budapest File* contains two poems devoted to the memory of the post-war generation, Sandor Weores and Istvan Vás (*Budapest File*, pp. 148-151)

for he stands over you
 at your grave, and tells you who
 you were, your every molecule
 his to dispose and rule.¹⁸⁶

The political and super-ideological scope in Illyés' 'Sentence' was as wide as Miłosz' 'Child of Europe' and as openly recognised: since 1956, it had circulated widely outside Hungary. But as the poem was republished in 1989, its role as a 'revolutionary' hymn was charged with the demystifying legacy which it carried and which dated back to the 1956 facts. Szirtes' translation, first published in *The Hungarian Quarterly*, was therefore in tune with the post-Wall political atmosphere; it aimed at re-historicising the notes of Illyés' tune and wanted to deflate the myth of the dissident writer, which would hardly fit this poet.¹⁸⁷ Though drawn to the non-political line of Hungarian post-War poetry, Szirtes expressed from the outset his concern with the specific stories and contexts from which poetry stemmed, while appreciating its potentially 'universal' mood.

The divergence between the politics of translation and the interests of emergent British poets that surfaced in the mid-eighties was partially fortuitous and certainly not unbridgeable, as Szirtes' experience shows. In retrospect, Heaney's eccentric literary interests seem coterminous with the eccentric impulse endorsed by Harrison, Smith and Szirtes; their work represented the English side of the radical cultural resistance to insularism and 'national' cultural orthodoxies which gained access to the mainstream poetry of the eighties. By no coincidence, this process was exemplified by the popularity of works such Morrison's and Motion's anthology, where Heaney featured alongside Harrison and Fenton, and by the parallel success of peripheral, Northern publishers such as Bloodaxe, which promoted both Szirtes and Smith (and has been active in promoting European poetry in translation ever since.) In this younger group of poets, however, the bundle of unreleased historical tensions underlying Heaney's meta-poetic concern was both loosened and consistently laid bare; Central and Eastern Europe, no longer swept off

¹⁸⁶ Gyula Illyés, 'A Sentence on Tyranny' in *Colonnade of Teeth*, pp. 31-36, p.36.

¹⁸⁷ On the political/non political threads of post-war Hungarian poetry, see George Gómori and George Szirtes, 'Introduction' to *Colonnade of Teeth*, pp.16-20.

geopolitical maps, appeared to them as the locus and focus of a notion of Europe as inclusive as that envisaged in the pre-Wall years. Spurred by their curiosity and their testimonial and memorial urge, they took the risk of facing untranslatable or lost stories which were ‘to be recovered in the act of historical imagination.’¹⁸⁸

The centrality of historical imagination was poignantly voiced by James Fenton, the poet who prominently tied verse with the need to bear witness to contemporary history and whose early work will be used here as a sort of introduction to the decentring impulse endorsed by his fellow poets. Like Tony Harrison, Fenton became gradually absorbed by the larger self-critical Western predicament that shifted the focus away from Europe, thus anticipating the global and political strain of the nineties. Yet despite his short-lived focus on Europe, his early articulation of the documentary impulse lurking in British poetry can key to the intermingling of ‘facts’, anecdotes, narrative and self-reflexive fictions which informs the testimonial sweep embraced by other poets considered here:

One longs to get back to reporting [...] By reporting I mean something that predates journalism – the fundamental activity. Those ‘narratives’ of previous centuries, which found publication as pamphlets or in magazines, often had their origin in some natural, functional activity [...] This is reporting in its natural state. Journalism becomes unnatural when it strays too far from such origins. It is quite astonishing to me how much interesting material is jettisoned by newspaper reporters because they know they will not be able to write it up, because to do so would imply they had been present at the events they are describing.¹⁸⁹

Written as an introduction to his collection of prose reportages in Vietnam and Cambodia, Fenton’s contention is debatable, at least from a professional viewpoint. Yet as a declaration of poetic intent, it contains an urgent appeal to imagination as a way to facts, which sets the ‘Eastern-focused thread’ apart from the informative and counter-informative tendencies of journalism or travel reportage, two genres which are more and more central to contemporary history.

¹⁸⁸ Ken Smith, *You Again: Last Poems and Words* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 75.

¹⁸⁹ James Fenton, ‘Introduction’ to *All the Wrong Places. Adrift in the Politics of Asia* (London: Viking, 1988), pp. x-xvii, xv-xvi.

For all its avoidance of social and political themes inherent in the evolving panorama of Eastern Europe, the political attitude embraced by Harrison, Szirtes and Smith turned Heaney's lamented disjunction from the shocks of history into a freer but ostensibly sceptical treatment of history itself, which stimulated in its turn questioning apprehensions of the present. Compared to the anxious views of Heaney's and Hughes' generation, the burden of history handed down on them was fruitfully weighed against 'a sense of belatedness built in to [their] historical self-awareness and turned to political effect', as Smith once put it.¹⁹⁰ Poets set out to discover the Eastern lands with alerted historical antennae: fighting against the inhibiting 'Gaze of the Gorgon', they displayed a consistent humanism which was deeply in tune with Heaney's preoccupations about art's connivance with barbarity and which metabolised the disruptions and the post-ideological fractures of Britain's move away from the Splendid Isolation.

Distrust of history and cultural self-assuredness resulted into political caution: bearing the brunt of outsiderism and displacement, these poets managed not to be absorbed in the cultural shock of facing Eastern Europe or in the temptations of prejudiced reading. A general diffidence towards appropriation of experience loomed large over the attempts poets made to overcome the fear of 'extinction of memory' that the Cold War had instilled in them, by bringing 'distant' histories and living memories to the fore. Before reaching back to the Nazi and Communist camps, Smith claimed that collecting the legacy of real extermination represented a compelling, but dangerous, moral act: 'to just write about [nuclear holocaust] is a projection into the imaginary. The only thing you can do is to read up on Hiroshima, and that's like camping in on someone else's experience.'¹⁹¹

Poets did finally read up on Auschwitz and Dresden, on Berlin and Budapest, on the stories of survival spread across the Eastern lands. These poets' constellation of historical and geographical points of references, their focus on the removed offshoots of history itself, and their reconsideration of the (Western) European myth of reconstruction, betrayed the kind of historically sensitivity powerfully caught by Stan Smith:

¹⁹⁰ Ken Smith, *You Again*, p. 69.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.151.

We do not inherit from the past one ‘total’ truth written by the victors [which] , everywhere dominant, neither suppresses all the contrary moments to be deciphered from its grand narratives, nor displaces all the discourses that lie outside it. Rather the past is gapped, condensed, and full of aporetic absences and half-presences. It is quite literally a bundle of documents, some mildewed and vanished, other guessed-at and inferred, surviving in fragments and hints.¹⁹²

Poets explored and exposed such a gapped past with the humbled attitude towards understanding that Weissbort expressed in his early introduction to the *Poetry of Survival*: ‘It is as if a kind of complacency has substituted itself for our earlier ignorance. We understand, therefore we may now forget’.¹⁹³

This political caution is maybe most detectable in the way Fenton, and later Harrison, Smith, and Szirtes shunned what Heaney called ‘the securities of the first person singular’¹⁹⁴: direct involvement can be countered with various strategies, from the contrived displacements of *A German Requiem*¹⁹⁵ to Ken Smith’s dispatches and ‘epistolary’ writing in *The Heart the Border*, passing through the interlocking readings of Western/British and Eastern European past and present in Harrison’s reportages until *Prometheus*, or the ‘photographer’- like journey of Szirtes’ *Budapest File(s)*, always ready to problematise questions of focus and historical predicament.

The link between individual and collective, public and private on which all these poets’ works pivot to different degrees is the measure of their questioning engagement with a public voice they were tempted but equally loath to assume. More than as a group, they might be perceived as poets sharing a common historical consciousness, albeit fragmented and consciously incomplete. This self-doubting yet demanding historical standpoint proves more predictable in Fenton’s scenic and disembodied inquiry into history, or in Harrison’s dramatic approach and free use of mythical frames. It is turned to political effect in both Szirtes and Smith: their lyrical/narrative poetry discloses a true effort to accommodate not the ‘voice’ or the ‘accent’, but the actual voices of past and present inhabitants of a former, invisible world suddenly become too close and too distant to be truly ‘Other’.

¹⁹² Stan Smith, ‘Salvaged from the ruins’ in *British Poetry*, ed. by Day and Docherty, pp. 63-86, p. 72.

¹⁹³ Daniel Weissbort, ‘Introduction’ to *The Poetry of Survival*, p.20.

¹⁹⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, p.116.

¹⁹⁵ James Fenton, ‘A German Requiem’, in *Memory of War*, pp. 3-10.

III. JAMES FENTON

III. 1 Travelling and writing: doubts of a former radical

Among the poets and critics who contributed to create Central Eastern Europe as a region of the literary world, the lack of interbreeding between British and Central Eastern European poetry was often lamented. In the mid-nineties, Donald Davie took issue with the double-edged implication of implicit or explicit comparisons:

[during the Cold War] the Poles, Hungarians and Yugoslavs [...] were being used in order to apply a lever to what was essentially an insular quarrel. The Polish names, for instance, have been wheeled into place from the 1960s onwards in order to shoulder aside the native product, the English poetry [...] as an example of what we English poets ought to have been doing, instead of what we have been said to be doing, which is genteel and finicky and dealing only with marginal and domestic matters.¹⁹⁶

Since the Cold War years, the aesthetic evaluation of Eastern European poets has been intimately bound up with the kind of ethical assent they commanded on such readers as Heaney or Hughes, and later on, Tom Paulin or Alvarez. This confirmed the kind of criticism levelled by Heaney against English, rather than generally British, historical consciousness.¹⁹⁷ As the post-war period and mid-century history were increasingly seen as the unavoidable legacy of the West, and the 'heartlands of Europe' recovered visibility, Eastern European poets could claim higher authority on history than their Western counterparts and became thus instrumental to debates which overcame the national and regional boundaries of the British intellectual scene.

To some extent, what encouraged comparisons with Eastern European writers was the reluctance to tackle recent history showed by the mainstream poets. To regard Reid's *Katerina*

¹⁹⁶ Adam Czerniawski, 'An Interview with Donald Davie', *Thumbscrew* 4 (1996), 23-30, p.25.

¹⁹⁷ Tom Paulin devoted some essays to the poetry of intellectual and more strictly political dissidence of, respectively, Zbigniew Herbert and Miroslav Holub in *Minotaur* (pp. 202- 234). At the end of the nineties, Alvarez reiterated his early comparative assessment of post-war British and Central Eastern European poetry: 'Decency is not the same thing as complacency; I think that English gentility, that aspect I was criticizing [in *The New Poetry*] was a kind of complacency [...] In totalitarian Eastern Europe, the private life became profoundly important. It was all they had. Public life was all bullshit and propaganda. Writing about private life and decency was a means of survival...' ('Keeping Hungry', *Poetry Review* 88:1, 1998, 88-94, pp. 89-90).

Brac as a ‘book about the inability to write about history’¹⁹⁸ might be misleading: Reid’s persona reflects above all a well-rooted notion of the ‘Eastern European poet’ as the intellectual capable to oppose the encroachment of official power, and official history, on art. It is ‘Katerina’, rather than the poems she delivers to ‘her’ Western audience, that reads like a coded message smuggled to the West. The political impact of post-war Eastern European testimonial writing is not Reid’s major preoccupation. This is, however, per se symptomatic: Reid might well take issue with themes like war and the condition of the poet under pressure as opposed to the bourgeois writer, but only at a remove. In the decade which ‘began with the noisy, triumphalistic dismantling of the post-1945 liberal consensus, [...] Britain, like Spain and Portugal before it, continued to decline while pretending not to notice’;¹⁹⁹ even poets who tried to de-provincialise English verse, like him, felt able to do so only through filtered historical and ethical predicament.

However, while in the eighties non-English poets attempted to extend the franchise of historical and political imagination, other English voices started to question the allegedly ‘off-centre status of England’, and to find a new location for England and the UK in the background of the twentieth century. One such poet was James Fenton, the writer and critic who at the end of the seventies most contributed to the success of the ‘Martian School’ of Reid and Christopher Raine, through an influential essay where he praised their techniques of defamiliarisation.²⁰⁰ In that period, Fenton was a young Oxford graduate, as eager to promote the de-insulation of the British domestic scene as to escape from England. Years later, as a professor at Oxford and a far less militant poet, Fenton brought up the question of English historical perspective in a series of lectures concerning the growth of poetic personality.²⁰¹ Philip Larkin, the ‘not untrue, not unkind’ voice of post-war England,²⁰² featured there alongside W.H. Auden and Wilfred Owen.

Adding to the ongoing re-assessment of the Hull poet, Fenton provides a perceptive response to those historical scars – the pre-war atmosphere where fascist sympathies were spreading, the

¹⁹⁸ O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p. 229.

¹⁹⁹ Hulse, Kennedy, and Morley, eds, ‘Introduction’ to *The New Poetry*, pp. 15-28, p.15.

²⁰⁰ James Fenton, ‘Of the Martian School’, *New Statesman*, 20 October 1978, p.250.

²⁰¹ James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁰² Seamus Heaney, ‘Englands of the Mind’, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp.150-169, p. 167.

Second World War and the eclipse of British world power – that turned Larkin into a controversial figure. Objecting to radical readings of Larkin’s conservatism, Fenton regards him as the spokesman of a complex, non-patriotic version of national consciousness. Fenton is not only concerned with Larkin’s absorption of England’s slow, post-imperial decline, but with the way Larkin’s fiction and poetry relates to the consequences of the Second World War years. In Fenton’s view, repressed trauma backfired through the Hull poet’s whole literary career:

For the rest of the course of the war – a war which was of a character that tended to include civilians, offering a number of ways of coming to feel part of the war effort – Larkin kept up that pose of studied indifference [...] Those who were actually wounded, wounded with shrapnel, years later might find pieces of the shrapnel working their way to the surface. Larkin seems to have been wounded by unshrapnel, and later little pieces of unshrapnel began to emerge, in his poems, squibs, letters and reviews.²⁰³

Fenton responds to the restorative, dehistoricized vision often ascribed to Larkin’s landscapes by detecting, for example, precise dynamics of removal in the depiction of the poet’s native town, Coventry, as deliberately ‘deprived of the actual past’ – that is to say, unscarred by the unexpected bombing that led to the British government’s notorious decision to ‘coventrize’ Northern Germany towards the end of WWII. The memory of pre-war and war years, Fenton suggests, affected forever the man and the poet. Far from regarding Larkin’s ‘decency’ as an expression of ‘needless caution’, Fenton regards it as a kind of reticence which bears the brunt of history.

This reading of Larkin reveals much Fenton’s own poetic personality and shows retrospectively how his early poetry voiced concerns shared and eventually thrown into sharp relief by such historically minded poets as Harrison, Smith and Szirtes. As his early, wry ‘Letter to John Fuller’ shows, Fenton rejected from the very beginning Alvarez’ life-long argument against gentility:

He knows what makes the poet tick.
He knows society is sick.
Gentility just gets his wick –

²⁰³ Fenton, ‘Philip Larkin: Wounded by Unshrapnel’, *Strength of Poetry*, pp. 45-64, p.57.

it makes him scowl
with rage. His hide is tough and thick
as a boiled owl.

He tells you, in the sombrest notes,
if poets want to get their oats
the first step is to slit their throats.²⁰⁴

In the seventies, Fenton was certainly as worried as Alvarez (addressed as ‘suicidal Al’) about the resurgent insular attitudes of post-war poets and their seeming unresponsiveness to the psychic destabilisation brought about by mid-century history. The ‘Letter’ was delivered in the wake of British extra-bloc cultural politics, when poetic sympathies were veering towards the (in many ways) opposite poles of Eastern European and Russian poetry on the one hand, and American poetry on the other. The poem was a drolly formal exercise for a poet well versed in light and nonsense poetry; nevertheless, and beside obvious political biases, Fenton’s refusal to regard American confessionalism as a way out of ‘little Englandism’ was serious.

Fenton’s contention with Alvarez betrayed a resistance to associate radicalism with individualism (here represented by American confessional poetry) which is different from that endorsed by his fellow poets, who started out as cultural outsiders. But it sprang from Fenton’s deep conviction that psychology is in fact instrumental for the poet keen on investigating society. The object of his satire is the extremized and introverted psychic state which Alvarez’ reading of American poets cast as a precondition to freedom in poetry and the kind of exposure from which he, no less than Harrison, Szirtes and Smith, was to shun. As the ‘Letter’ humorously suggests, psychological investigation is not, in Fenton’s view, at odds with restraint; no cult of extremism is necessary to delve deep into individuals and society or to touch the innermost meanders of humanity. Restraint and reticence might be used to utter unconventional viewpoints, and to show in what sense ‘society is sick’. A poet like Larkin can thus reach out to states of extremely sharpened consciousness which are incompatible with socially and politically sanctioned values:

²⁰⁴ James Fenton, ‘Letter to John Fuller’, in *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1983* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983; hereafter *Memory of War*), p. 67

in this sense, Fenton's Larkin is the legitimate heir of the war poets, whose aesthetic and moral resonance has been recognised throughout the century.

Fenton's attempt to return Larkin to history and to his literary forefathers strikes a balance between the prototype of English gentility and the enduring model of twentieth-century English engaged verse, that is to say war (especially First World War) poetry. This line of British verse has never stopped to attract post-war generations of poets and critics; all through the second half of the twentieth century, it has been construed as the strain of autochthonous verse which most legitimately lays claim to bearing witness to man. Heaney's or Hughes's appreciation of, respectively, Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas conveys the sense that, by 'establishing humanity as an elemental force' (to borrow once more Milosz' words), such poetry could vehicle a message as deep as that ascribed to Eastern European poetry. The recent upsurge of anti-war movements in poetry seem to confirm this association: the legacy of native war poets and that of mid-century Central and Eastern European poets feature as the most consistent core of anthologies such as *101 Poets against the War*.

As suggested beforehand, war became a prominent issue in British poetry at the turn of the century. In this context, it might not be surprising that a poet should play on the historical-literary afterimage of Central Eastern Europe to tackle the subject of war: the superposition between ghastly Eastern European scenarios (fraught with echoes of the Yugoslavian conflict) and the urgent testimony of the poet as war chronicler informs, in fact, the central section of David Harsent's *Legion* (2005). The central sequence in *Legion* pivots on fictional reports smuggled from a place which readers are brought to associate with Eastern Europe: Harsent's poems are, in fact, inspired by the Bosnian poet Goran Simic's poetic reportage on the Sarajevo siege.²⁰⁵ Harsent uses a nondescript Eastern European setting as a panel onto which to project images stolen from a 'war zone', at once obscenely detailed and made non-specific by carefully wrought fragmentation. Sections of the reportage are deliberately deleted:

²⁰⁵ Harsent's appropriation of Eastern European scenarios has been attacked by David Wheatley in his otherwise appreciative evaluation of *Legion*: 'Why set the book in Central and Eastern Europe if not to trade on that region's stereotypical associations with primitivism and never ending ethnic strife?' (Wheatley, 'Dichtung und Wahrheit', pp. 665).

...during which the guards took real delight
 On a concrete floor
 Soon running with their own
 Down like dogs, father and daughter
 Mother and son, or taken out to the block where
 The report states, 'amid general laughter' ...²⁰⁶

As happened with Reid twenty years before, this Eastern-European atmosphere allows Harsent to feel detached from real facts and to open the scene to a universal meaning: as the poet maintains, '[his] work on Goran [Simic]'s poems might well have had an effect on the poems in *Legion* – there's quite a lot of Bosnia in it – though *Legion* is not about any specific war.'²⁰⁷ Of course, there are nuclear differences between these poets. Reid's groundtone is lyrical, if awkwardly so. Harsent's 'despatches', by contrast, owe their naked diction and demystifying gist to a journalistic strain initiated by Fenton, some of whose fleeting dispatches were published in the *Times Literary Supplement* between 1981 and 1983. One of these poems, 'Lines for Translation into Any Language', features in the collection which established Fenton's reputation both at home and abroad, *The Memory of War and Children in Exile*. Like Harsent, Fenton privileges the bare style of reportage, the threatening and baffling anonymity of telegrams:

1. I saw that the shanty town had grown over the graves and that the crowd lived among the memorials.
2. It was never very cold – a parachute slung between an angel and an urn afforded shelter for the newcomers.
3. Wooden beds were essential.
4. These people kept their supplies of gasoline in litre bottles, which their children sold at the cemetery gates.
5. That night the city was attacked with rockets.
6. The firebrigade bided its time.
7. The people dug for money beneath their beds, to pay the firemen.
8. The shanty town was destroyed, the cemetery restored.
9. Seeing a plane shot down, not far from the airport, many of the foreign community took fright.

²⁰⁶ Harsent, *Legion*, p.15.

²⁰⁷ Vicci Bentley, 'Presiding Spirit: David Harsent', *Magma Poetry* 34: 1 (2006), 37-8, p.38.

10. The next day, they joined the queues at the gymnasium, asking to leave.
11. When the victorious army arrived, they were welcomed by the firebrigade.
12. This was the only spontaneous demonstration in their favour.
13. Other spontaneous demonstrations in their favour were organised by the victors (*Memory* 20)

In the collection, 'Lines' works as a companion piece to poems tackling more specific historical issues, namely the memory of the Second World War and the twin issues of (British) colonialism and (American) imperialism. In fact, unlike Harsent, Fenton betrays an awkward relation to 'found material', which he draws from a remote, though highly controversial, episode in comparison to Harsent's Bosnia). The poem actually takes its cue from the 1945 aerial bombings on Northern Germany, where not just civilians but the foreign communities in both Dresden and Hamburg inadvertently became the target of the RAF's firestorms. Certainly, Fenton deprives his belated report of any contextual framework, by updating and disguising specific historical references (train stations are replaced by airports). The impersonal, casually provocative groundtone (celebrations are organised by the victorious army) strips conflict down to the bare essentials, which defy understanding. What sounds like unearned irony due to the reporter's fragmentary messages implies a darker kind of irony: no complete reconstruction of events could make facts fit into a more meaningful pattern.

At the beginning of the eighties, such dry irony was probably backed by Fenton's real experience as a reporter-in-the-field; his fame as a restless left-wing poet rested on his travels across 'all the wrong places' of Far Eastern regions such as Vietnam, Indochina and Cambodia in the seventies.²⁰⁸ While still unable to make up his mind about a journalistic or a poetic career, Fenton covered Far Eastern regions partly as a freelance writer and partly as a foreign correspondent for the *New Statesman*. In the mid-eighties, he offered some of his previous articles, plus a reportage on the Philippines to *Granta*, while the review was pioneering a new

²⁰⁸ James Fenton's career as a journalist is outlined in Dana Gioia, 'The Rise of James Fenton', *Barrier of a Common Language: An American Looks at Contemporary British Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 20-36.

line of foreign correspondence thanks to the collaboration of Western writers and journalists like George Steiner, Timothy Garton Ash, Gore Vidal, as well as of a number of Eastern European personalities, like Milan Kundera, H.M. Enzensberger and Czeslaw Milosz.

As an emergent poet in Great Britain, Fenton had already shown his concern with worldwide politics: his first collection, *Terminal Moraine* (1972)²⁰⁹ put English and Western post-colonial decline into perspective by wittily merging past and present.²¹⁰ His experience as a political journalist, however, marked a shift in his poetic treatment of historical and political material: it led him towards a sharper European sensibility as well as to a cautious appropriation of distant, yet increasingly international, events which is not to be found in his later volumes.

The international scope of Fenton's work met with general approval at the beginning of his career and later on, in the heated context of the early eighties. There was general agreement about Fenton's concern with the legacy of colonialism and with neo-imperialism in *The Memory of War*: this theme informs 'Nest of Vampires' (pp. 44-46) and 'A Vacant Possession' (pp. 47-49), poems which expose Fenton's *virtuoso* deconstruction of narrative patterns as a way to re-actualise the past through de-contextualisation, imbrication of narrative levels, inclusion of sub-literary genres or modes and parody. This kind of detached, playful handling of political material is even stronger in poems which address the horizons of Western (American) imperialism, such as 'Dead Soldiers' (40-43): playfulness is partially a way to articulate the speaker's cultural distance from what he sees.

In the seventies, Fenton's sensitivity was sharpened by various journeys eastwards, where he witnessed the outcome of the first, serious blow to America's role as a self-styled guarantee of a world order and the abrupt collapse of Western third-worldish expectations. As a member of the International Socialists, Fenton shared the enthusiasms and the tensions of the radical Left, on the rise for the very first time since World War II. He was mostly drawn to visit places, like Cambodia, where Western superpowers turned a blind eye on ideological motivation, and 'Cold

²⁰⁹ James Fenton, *Terminal Moraine* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972).

²¹⁰ Fenton's first successful work, the long poem *Our Western Furniture* (Oxford: Sycamore, 1968; republished in *Terminal Moraine*) revolves on the 'mutually incomprehensible meeting between of brash imperialistic America and tottering imperial Japan' in the second half of the nineteenth century, through a sequence of interlocking monologues which fail to turn into dialogue.

War' was nothing more than a euphemism. Enthusiasm and disappointment merged, as the need to provide poetic witness grew:

1973 was just the time the Americans were withdrawing, and so it was obviously going to be a crucial period to see whether the regimes that they left behind – the Lon Nol regime in Phnom Penh and the Thieu regime in Saigon – were going to last. [...] I wanted to see that. I wanted to see a war, and what it was like.²¹¹

Initially, this convergence of literary and political purpose was not fruitful: all Fenton wrote were prose sketches and articles where he records the confusion of Western observers and the disillusion of the far Left which supported national liberation struggles, rather than providing insights into the situation the West was actually leaving behind. All through the articles, Fenton's own emotional response is faithfully registered. Especially Cambodia proves to be a shocking experience for the poet/journalist: the disastrous war between the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge and its aftermath, the fear of those who escaped and the forced erasure of memory among those who stayed seem to impress him more than other conflicts. Throughout the narrative, Fenton's way of stumbling into history is effective; nevertheless, anecdotes fail to cohere into full-fledged reportage: unlike contemporary journals set in the Far East, such as his colleague Tiziano Terzani's articles, Fenton provides too little information to unravel the tangle of world politics.²¹²

As an introduction to Fenton's poetics, however, *All the Wrong Places* is as significant as his other prose pieces and reports. It illuminates the narrative techniques and psychological approach which was to flow into the less apparent political strain of *The Memory of War* where Fenton focuses on the effects of war, and of collective memory in both surviving and exiled communities. Signalling the climax of Fenton's political engagement, his experience in the Far East, which kept him away from poetry until the end of the decade, brought about a further realisation:

²¹¹ Andrew Motion, 'An Interview with James Fenton', *Poetry Review* 72, (1984), 17-23, p. 18.

²¹² Tiziano Terzani was, together with Fenton, one of the few Western journalists who reported on the fall of Saigon and the upheavals in Cambodia. The two met in Saigon; at the time, Terzani was working as a foreign correspondent for *Der Spiegel*.

I think it would be different if it was one's own war. But supposing you just went and found a war [...] and wrote about it there would be something disgusting about doing that. On the other hand if you think about our war artists, who went out and were actually commissioned, then you see the crucial difference. It was their war.²¹³

This argument is strengthened by Fenton's view of one's responsibility towards history: the necessity to report on wars made him reflect on the way even the slightest detail might be accommodated to suit dominant readings:

Events in history are not supposed to look historical: no eye perceived a battlefield at a glance, no dying leader composed his followers around him in the neoclassical manner; even many of the great war photographs are said to have been rearranged. The victors write, rewrite, or retouch their history.

I knew something of the 1930s and I absolutely did not believe that one should, as a reporter, invent victories for the comrades. I had the illusion that I was honest, and in many ways I was. What I could not see in myself, but what I realise now is so prevalent on the Left, is the corrupting effect of political opportunism.²¹⁴

This kind of realisation balances the equally strong impulse to 'bear witness' which characterises war-centred political poetry. In Fenton's case, it checked rather early the willingness to depict wars, despite his apparent awareness that conflicts are the most ambiguously visible aspect of power relations growing wider, deeper and increasingly removed from the theatres of war.

III. 2 War and the memory of war: Europe's invisible walls

Like Harrison (in his pre-protest poetry), Szirtes and Smith, Fenton opted for a more indirect approach to present and past history; after his experiences in the East, he perceived the consequences of war, rather than war itself, as a suitable subject, and a way to contribute to the transmission of memory. By no chance, regarding Fenton together with Harrison and Heaney as the legitimate 'voices of history' in British poetry of the mid-eighties, Damian Grant suggests that:

²¹³ Motion, 'Interview with J.F.', p. 19.

²¹⁴ James Fenton, *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of Asia* (London: Viking, 1989), p.106.

George Orwell said that history stopped in 1936, and history in the sense of objective, independent witness no doubt pre-deceased this date (if indeed it ever existed). The poet today will write from Inside the Whale, participating in the production of history rather than transcribing it from ‘authority’, be it that of a stone tablet or telescreen.²¹⁵

Starting out as a journalist, Fenton felt quite early the need to accommodate his talent for documentary writing rather than giving it up. Echoed by Ken Smith’s own misgiving about ‘camping in on someone else’s experience’, his hesitation as a journalist led him to remould his political imagination while drawing from his first-hand experience.

Fenton’s initial idea of investigating distant political scenarios brought his literary efforts to a temporary halt, but helped him to articulate the necessary distance from representation while retaining the ethical tensions which animated the criticism of older poets like Heaney. Fenton shared the radical implications which Heaney, in the *Government of the Tongue* lectures, laid bare by gauging the moral and political status of Auden’s voice in the pre-war years. For Fenton, as for Heaney, Auden is the political voice of pre-war England. Heaney reads Auden’s poetry through the lenses of Owen’s reflection on poetry and the pity of war:

‘All a poet can do today is warn’: these imperatives could be effectively fulfilled only if the poet who was warning or telling his truth was doing so with the authority of experience [...] He connived in what he deplored so that he could deplore what he connived in.²¹⁶

Fenton modulates such a notion of connivance by tackling the vexed question of Auden’s own contention with Orwell. Commenting on Orwell’s reaction to ‘Spain 1937’, Fenton detects a similarity between the two writers’ firm anti-ideological condemnation of the conflict which continued to haunt Western democracies well after 1945. Fenton points approvingly to Auden’s doubts about the possible misconstruction of his political engagement, his distrust of political

²¹⁵ Damian Grant, ‘The Voices of History in British Poetry, 1970-84’, *Etudes Anglaises* 38:2 (1985), 158-179, p. 160.

²¹⁶ Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, p. xv.

language (as manifested by his doubt ‘whether there is such a thing as a just war’²¹⁷) and of his moral commitment:

Auden was a rhetorician. He knew himself to be a rhetorician of the highest powers, and, when he saw the power he had, he recoiled from it in deep horror. And as he recoiled, he filled his followers with dismay, since they could not see the furies that he saw [...] What Orwell was sick of, Auden too was sick of.²¹⁸

Fenton perceives both writers as exemplary in both intellectual and anti-ideological disposition. From the very start, however, Auden has been his point of reference: already as a student of anthropology and sociology, Fenton was fascinated by the clinically minded disposition of the poet, to whom he was introduced as a writer by John Fuller and whom he later met personally. Following Auden’s footsteps, he tried to reject ‘the securities of the first person singular’ but also to blunt the assumptions and programmatic detachment of the reporter.

Fenton’s distance from any safe cultural assumptions was one of the first qualities to be acknowledged in his poetry and especially in *The Memory of War and Children in Exile*. In Motion and Morrison’s debated anthology, where he featured alongside Harrison and Heaney, an alleged return to narrative in poetry was complicated by the indirection of his ‘secret narratives’, defined by Alan Robinson as ‘either the fragmentary traces of a displaced narrative which must be recovered inferentially, or alternatively a palimpsest of apparently discrete, incomplete fictions, the nature of whose interrelationship remains obscure or conjectural.’²¹⁹ This deconstruction of narrative patterns draws close to techniques of defamiliarization which Fenton detected in the ‘Martian school’ but is primarily instrumental in signalling a formal retrenchment from linear story telling.²²⁰ Above all, it enhanced his initial allegiance to a poetic of impersonality, of perspectival displacement, merging a mild, late modernist note with

²¹⁷ Qtd. in Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 157.

²¹⁸ James Fenton, ‘Blake Auden and James Auden’, *Strength of Poetry*, pp. 218 and p. 227.

²¹⁹ Robinson, ‘James Fenton’s ‘Narratives’: Some Reflections on Post-Modernism’, *Instabilities*, pp. 1-15, p.1.

²²⁰ In the late seventies, Craig Raine and Christopher Reid started a short-lived yet fashionable poetic fashion based on techniques of defamiliarization aimed at describing ordinary life through unusual and alienated but strictly factual perspectives. The term ‘Martian’ refers to Raine’s ‘A Martian Sends a Post-Card Home’ which was regarded as a sort of manifesto. Throughout the eighties Raine and Reid represented formal experimentation on the British scene untouched by concurrent ‘de-centring’ strains (immigrant, working class and women poetry); Fenton’s sympathy for them signalled his integration into the mainstream of poetry.

Audenesque apprehensions aimed at creating a ‘brooding sense of atmosphere’.²²¹ This new poetic approach emerged plainly when Fenton shifted his focus from England and the Far East to Europe and momentarily detached himself from overt political predicament.

Tellingly enough, his abortive career as a reporter in Eastern Europe led Fenton back to poetry, after he became ‘painfully aware of [his] short-comings as a foreign correspondent.’²²² In his collection of theatre reviews *You Were Marvellous*, Fenton voices both his personal disillusionment with journalism and documentary writing and the discomfiting experience of his cross curtain moves in the late seventies. He casts himself as the Westerner incapable of deciphering Eastern European reality; then, talking about his disastrous experience as a journalist in Hungary, he addresses quite overtly the opacity of Eastern Europe:

My last assignment was a fiasco. I was to write an article about Budapest, a city which I know slightly, and which I very much like. I went to Budapest in great hopes. I met people. I walked around the city. I put myself as much as possible in the way of experience. I was confident that in the course of time I would have a theme, and some experience to back it up. But as the time allotted drew to a close, I knew that I had no material at all [...] From Budapest I took a train to Vienna, acutely depressed. Sitting opposite me was a powerfully-constructed peasant in wide breeches and a thick jacket [...] There was no question of not talking. He was extremely happy to tell everything about his life and opinions, and in a short while I became sufficiently accustomed to his dialect to understand a proportion of what he was saying. (21)

The man turns out to be an Austro-Hungarian survivor of both World Wars. His half-comical, half-tragic recollections stir up Fenton’s curiosity:

If the train had been travelling in the opposite direction, if this man had been on his way to visit his Hungarian in-laws, as opposed to returning home to Austria, all would have been well. I should have arrived in Budapest with my senses sharpened and my work already under way. ...This man’s disquisitions on Hitler’s good and bad points was causing acute embarrassment elsewhere in the compartment, but it fell like music on my ears. He was saying what he thought, what he had thought over the decades. He was talking without circumspection. (22)

²²¹ Gioia, ‘The Rise of James Fenton’, p. 28.

²²² James Fenton, *You Were Marvellous: Theatre Reviews from the Sunday Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 20.

Fenton's retrospective remarks strike a crucial note, highlighting how his fellow traveller could, in the relatively relaxed atmosphere of a train, address the taboo which was shared on either side of the Curtain. This aspect of Central European opacity, the impossibility or determination not to speak about recent past, increasingly attracted Fenton after a year spent shuttling between East and West Berlin at the end of the seventies, when he collaborated with the *Guardian* for a short period.

Germany brought Fenton back to poetry through a different kind of journalism, theatre criticism, to which he shifted while still in England, working for *The Sunday Times*. Fenton admitted that he found he could write again as he realised that 'doing theatre criticism is a very stimulating job. You're watching other people's writing in action all the time, and having this large input of artistic experience, and you feel challenged by it.'²²³ Reviewing drama, Fenton felt plugged again to the German experience.

While in Berlin, Fenton got interested in the alternate fortune of a play that was provoking heated debate on both sides of the Wall: Rolf Hochhuth's documentary play *Juristen*.²²⁴ Like many German artists, Hochhuth attempted to break through the veil of reticence and orchestrated silence around the Nazi years by positing political and judicial continuity between the Nazi period and post-war Germanies. Hochhuth's provocation was part of a wider construction and retrieval of memory, where both Eastern and Western writers took part. Theatre, however, gave Fenton the chance to watch how staged memory affected the audience:

The audience applauded, but I noticed that the applaud rolled down from the gallery into the stalls. The partisans were in the cheap seats. The faces in the stalls were uneasy. The presentation is a mixture of realism and documentary

²²³ Motion, 'Interview with J.F.', p.20.

²²⁴ Hochhuth has been one of the most debated figures of German drama since the sixties, when his play *Der Stellvertreter*, directed by Piscator, raised a furore because of its overt detraction of the Catholic Church's silence about the advent of Nazism and fascism. Blowing more directly at Germany, *Juristen* likewise raised controversy as the play toured around Germany, though unlike the former play, it enjoyed no European resonance. Over recent years, Hochhuth has been attacked less for his plays than for his provocative defence of the Holocaust denier David Irving, who was trialled and detained in Austria and in the UK on charge of negationism. See Judith Beniston, 'Unzulänglichkeit gegenüber der Geschichte': Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* and Weiss' s *Die Ermittlung*', in *Representing the German Nation: History and Identity in Twentieth-Century German Literature*, ed. by Mary Fulbrook and Martin Swales (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 91-117.

and reconstruction [...] There is also a chronicler who interrupts the course of the play to give factual details. Every effort is made to keep the audience's mind on historical truth. Hochhuth's strength in the play derives from what I would call his ethical realism – by which I mean that every moral issue is seen in terms of the particular experience of the particular people involved. No one is a cipher.²²⁵

Fenton's poetics, partly a critique of Brechtian theatre (which he conceives as ideologically biased), is strengthened by the awareness that Hochhuth aimed at blurring the boundary between past and present.²²⁶ By no chance, this play is the only example of German drama (apart from Brecht) featuring in *You Were Marvellous*: it certainly stirred Fenton's interest in the ways memory was being withheld on German soil, where 'circumspection' and silence signalled the Germans' problematic relation to their past.

III. 3 Time-shifts, narrative disruption and the outsider perspective in 'A German Requiem'

This climate of reticence was conjured up, by means of defamiliarization and indirection, in 'A German Requiem', a sequence of poems addressing the legacy of Second World War in Berlin. Fenton is concerned with the dynamics of collective memory, and examines the intersection of institutional forms of memory and individual dynamics of trauma. The sequence is a series of loosely bound sketches or vignettes (unlike much of Fenton's subsequent work, it is written in free verse) where estrangement is not just a structural device but the very object of investigation: Fenton's concern is indeed with a community's contrived distance from its shocking past. This is rendered through the perspective of an observer whose insights shed light on the fractures of communication where mnemonic short-circuits surface:

[i]

It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down.
It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses.

²²⁵ Fenton, review of *Juristen* by Rolf Hochhuth (*The Sunday Times*, 17 February 1980), *You Were Marvellous*, pp. 54-5.

²²⁶ See his review of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in *You Were Marvellous*, pp. 27-9.

It is not the streets that exist. It is the street that no
 longer exist.
 It is not your memories which haunt you.
 It is not what you have written down.
 It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget.
 What you must go on forgetting all your life.
 And with any luck oblivion should discover a ritual.
 You will find out that you are alone in the
 enterprise.
 Yesterday the very furniture seemed to reproach you.
 Today you take your place in the Widow's Shuttle (9).²²⁷

The poem's beginning immediately confronts readers with Fenton's use of defamiliarization, which moves away from the objective, report-like stylisation of events structural to 'Lines for Translation' and plays instead on decontextualised commentary. The initial, deadpan reflections define an anonymous speaker which fits Motion's and Morrison's notion of the 'intrigued observer' or the 'anthropologist' as an increasingly diffused outsider stance in British poetry.²²⁸ Yet the speaker's estrangement from the scene he depicts instantly draws attention to the peculiar climate of suspension which permeates it. The initial iteration of noun clauses frames a ghastly atmosphere where place and social space intermingle and are evoked through a kind of photo-negative effect: erasure is exposed as the very dimension where a non-specific subject, 'they', moves. War, the ubiquitous theme of Fenton's collection, is only obliquely hinted at, 'knocking down' and 'building', suggesting a planned de- and reconstruction, rather than the accidental and dramatic destruction brought about war. From the very start, it is another kind of emptiness Fenton ascribes to the nondescript cityscape which is the setting of his 'Requiem'.

The reader is then plunged *in medias res* into a tentative dialogue where the speaker's equally anonymous and dumb addressee, a war widow, is given advice as she prepares to attend a

²²⁷ Each stanza in 'A German Requiem' is printed on a separate page. In order to facilitate analysis, ordinal numbers have been ascribed to its ten sections. As throughout the rest of the survey, cardinal numbers at the end of quotes indicate page numbers.

²²⁸ Morrison and Motion, 'Introduction', p.12. Fenton's ambivalent handling of the conative function ('you') casts the speaker as both a 'presenter' (an agency taking up 'narrative presentation' of a given situation and obtrusively stepping into it) and a narrator, thus handling both external and internal focalization. For an in-depth analysis of literary 'presentation' in relation to narratologic notions of 'Showing' and 'Telling' and to filmic/photographic language, see Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms* (London: Ithaca, 1990), pp.139-60.

memorial service; viewpoint and register hover between factual detail and internal focalisation on the one hand and surreal overtones (the ‘Widow’s Shuttle’) and a kind of voice-over on the other hand. Commemoration, the theme of Fenton’s ‘Requiem’, is ushered in through the speaker’s insistence on memory and forgetting which immediately explodes any binary opposition between the two terms. The primary, more inclusive meaning of ‘memories’ (‘It is not your memories which haunt you’), which may hint at the woman’s personal ghosts and thus at non confessed experiences, is restricted by the following line, where memory rather equals wilful remembrance, recorded personal experience. Sentence construction points to a parallel tension between presence and absence (the buildings and the empty space separating them) and between recorded and unrecorded memory. In the first case, this tension is however complicated, as the speaker detects the waste lying underneath both buildings and the spaces between them; if removal of such waste is implied by the first lines of the sequence, a sort of cognate removal of psychic waste is inherent in the reference to the woman’s memories, and more generally in the act of commemoration which the woman’s act epitomises. Fenton exposes straightforwardly the psychic core of the sequence: traumatic memory (what is it that ‘has not been written down’?) and consequent repression are suggested together with a vague, unexplained sense of guilt (‘today the very furniture reproached you’). The antiphrastic value of the speaker’s assumed need to leave behind ‘what you must forget / you must go on forgetting’ is particularly telling: first, because recollection is regarded as obnoxious, and second, because the opening remark tackles private memory – suggesting, for instance, private memoirs – while in fact the speaker’s focus (and the meaning of his address) shifts towards socially experienced memory, where removal ‘may discover a ritual’ with its unspoken promise of eradicating any ‘reproach’. Memory is thus placed at the intersection between the conscious need to forget and the unconscious dynamics of recollection, which of course eschew any determination to leave the past behind but are subject to unaccountable amnesia: something has, in fact, already been forgotten.

This insight is complicated by the following section. The memorial service is announced here through confused and confusing referents: still the silent addressee of the speaker, the widow

turns out to be in fact a ‘young lady’, who is loath to visit the graveyards of ‘her ancestors’ and haunted by troubling memories. The speaker’s teasingly empathetic mood assumes familiarity with the woman’s fears: yet before resuming his didactic-explanatory tone, his voice translates the woman’s innermost feelings into images whose resonance is hard to grasp. Revealing her anxiety, the expected memorial service is transfigured into two opposite kinds of celebration, so that funeral and wedding blur into each other:

[ii]

The bus is waiting at the southern gate
to take you to the city of your ancestors
which stands on the hill opposite, with gleaming
pediments,
as vivid as this charming square, your home.
Are you shy? You should be. It is almost like a
wedding,
the way you clasp your flowers and give a little tug at
your veil. Oh,
the hideous bridesmaids, it is natural you should
resent them
just a little, on this first day.
But that will pass, and the cemetery is not far.
Here comes the driver, flicking a toothpick into the
gutter,
his tongue still searching between his teeth.
See, he has not noticed you. No one has noticed you.
It will pass, young lady, it will pass.

[iii]

How comforting it is, once or twice a year,
to get together and forget the old times.
As on those special days, ladies and gentlemen,
when the boiled shirts gather at the graveside
and a leering waistcoat approaches the rostrum.
It is like a solemn pact between the survivors.
The mayor has signed it on behalf of the freemasonry.
The priest has sealed it on behalf of all the rest.
Nothing more need be said, and it is better that way -

[iv]

The better for the widow, that she should not live in
 fear of surprise,
 the better for the young man, that he should move at
 liberty between the armchairs,
 the better that these bent figures who flutter among the
 graves
 tending the nightlights and replacing the
 chrysanthemums
 are not ghosts,
 that they shall go home.
 The bus is waiting, and on the upper terraces
 the workmen are dismantling the houses of the dead. (10-12)

The young lady's function in the sequence is twofold. Introducing the memorial service of the third section, she provides the associative link to the third, eighth and ninth sections, where ritual oblivion is in fact performed by a group of survivors. Though a half-sketched feature, the widow keys into the leading motif of Fenton's 'Requiem', that of amnesia and remembrance which blend together in the survivors' memory of war. The shift from one context to the other is subtle and unmarked, as the speaker leads from one site of commemoration to another through dazzling, fragmentary scenes (sections ii-iii and vi-vii) which might be interpreted as part of the widow's unexpressed memory:

[v]

But when so many had died, so many and at such
 speed,
 There were no cities waiting for the victims.
 They unscrewed the name-plates from the shattered
 doorways
 And carried them away with the coffins.
 So the squares and parks were filled with the eloquence
 of young cemeteries:
 The smell of fresh earth, the improvised crosses
 and all the impossible directions in brass and enamel.

[vi]

'Doctor Gliedschirm, skin specialist, surgeries 14-16
 hours or by appointment.
 Professor Sargnagel was buried with four degrees, two
 associate memberships

and instructions to tradesmen to use the back entrance.
 Your uncle's grave informed you that he lived on the
 third floor, left.
 You were asked please to ring, and he would come
 down in the lift
 to which one needed a key...

[vii]

Would come down, would ever come down
 with a smile like thin gruel, and never too much to say.
 How he shrank through the years.
 How you towered over him in the narrow cage.
 How he shrinks now...

[viii]

But come. Grief must have its end? Guilt too, then.
 And there is no limit to the resourcefulness of
 recollection.
 So that a man might say and think:
 When the world was at its darkest,
 When the black wings passed over the rooftops
 (and who can divine His purposes?), even then
 there was always, always a fire in this hearth.
 You see this cupboard? A priest-hole!
 And in that lumber-room whole generations have been
 Housed and fed.
 Oh, if I were to begin, if I were to begin to tell you
 the half, the quarter, a mere smattering of what we
 went though!

[ix]

His wife nods, and a secret smile
 like a breeze with enough strength to carry one dry leaf
 over two pavingstones, passes from chair to chair.
 Even the enquirer is charmed.
 He forgets to pursue the point.
 It is not what he wants to know.
 It is what he wants not to know.
 It is not what they say.
 It is what they do not say (13-18).

As a cursory look at the layout of 'A German Requiem' reveals, Fenton's original idea was to draft a series of sketches inspired by Berlin, which were finally recast as nine separate stanzas.²²⁹ The term 'sketch' fits the frame-like, fleeting presentation which characterises Fenton's narrative approach: yet the montage-like patterning, the symbolic value of iconic detail and the carefully wrought interlocking of temporal frames also exposes his effort to articulate and mediate his response to the delicate question that has been haunting post-war history in Germany, the memory of the Second World War and of Nazism.

The speaker's casual obtrusiveness and Fenton's handling of deitics and pronouns signal the poet's conscious estrangement from his 'raw material'. The beginning of the poem sounds like an answer to a question which is indefinitely deferred, as its close confirms. The trope of silent questioning runs in fact throughout the sequence: the sections centring on the memorial service, the woman's memories and the gathering of survivors sustain such questioning only partially, and echo the material and psychic removal which surfaces on the very first images of the sequence. At the very end, this trope is strengthened by the appearance of an 'enquirer', presumably distinct from the young widow and just as fleeting. The gathering on which the poem ends may suggest a meeting where even strangers are invited to share the surviving community's painful memories yet are ultimately denied access to them: elusion is a ritual performed by the survivors whose pact entails *not* disclosing their memories. Significantly, the enquirer is 'charmed' and finally shares in the silence around which the group cohere.

The poem's external frame constructs the speaker as a silent witness to both the woman's journey and the survivors' meeting, yet distinctly removed from 'them'. This provides the sequence with symmetrical patterning, as the speaker's initial assertions are resumed and take on gnomic value by means of variation: 'It is not what he wants to know. It is what he wants not to know.' (19) The hammering note struck by noun clauses hardly disguises the layers of reticence through which the whole sequence moves: the poem's displaced subject, 'being German' and facing memory, is enhanced through negation. Tracks of memory are kaleidoscopically arranged and interspersed with (presumably) hallucinatory impressions: in the nightmarish visit at the

²²⁹ Motion, 'Interview with J. F.', p. 20.

graveyard, the young woman's 'hideous bridesmaids' may, as has been suggested, remind one of SS guards (the veil hinting at the sacrificial overtones of the very word Holocaust),²³⁰ which would locate the woman's journey in the immediate post-war years; in the following section, the improvised cemeteries might blur the image of one of Berlin first post-war graveyards (which belonged to the British section of the city) with the image of official celebrations dedicated, much later on, to the victims of Nazi persecution. Where exactly to place both action and the speaker's silent address to the widow and to 'them' is quite hard. What the reader is given are but clues, which frustrate any attempt to grasp the whole truth behind the survivors' pact. As Damian Grant suggests, 'we are back with Orwell ('history stopped in 1936'), [...] back with Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, where a successful imbrication of bloody events made news becomes a reason for forgetting.'²³¹ The comparison is instructive, as Kundera's novel (1979) touches on the individual's resistance to commanded, 'official forgetting', being set in post-war communist Czechoslovakia; whereas at the time Fenton wrote his sequence, official policies of memory were met with the individual resistance to re-elaborate the Nazi past both in the FDR, where those memories had been repressed for roughly twenty years and in the GDR, where manipulated memory had resulted into a relative detachment from that past.²³² The poem's subject might in fact be, quite generally, the silence into which were plunged most Germans who survived Nazism but might have been directly or indirectly 'complicit' in it; nevertheless, more restrictive meanings of words such as 'survivors' and 'victims' will suggest different interpretations throughout the analysis.

One of the strategies of Fenton's poems, especially those facing the unfamiliar scenarios of English colonial past or Far Eastern conflicts, is to push the narrator/speaker's outsider stance to the point where, as Ian Gregson claims, 'the linguistic representation of "otherness" encounters an experiential otherness so extreme that it subverts representation itself.'²³³ This is true of

²³⁰ Robinson, 'James Fenton's Narratives', p.4.

²³¹ Grant, 'The Voice of History', p. 175.

²³² See Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²³³ Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 69.

poems mentioned above, such as ‘A Vacant Possession’ and ‘Dead Soldiers’, where the use of ‘secret narratives’ highlights the speaker’s outsider stance. The scenic, almost cinematic conception of ‘A German Requiem’ does not go as far as to radically subvert narrative composition. Although perspectival shifts and the dove-tailing of different discursive levels are crucial to the construction of the third, sixth, seventh and eighth vignettes, this does not totally thwart structural and semantic consistency. The speaker’s (and thus Fenton’s) response to the emotional depths which are being evaded is implicit in the formal pattern adopted in each section. In the third scene, for example, shifts of register merge the speaker’s voice with the voices of the ‘celebrants’: the voice-over’s jocular groundtone – ‘How comforting it is, once or twice a year/ to get together and forget the old times’ (12) – plainly undermines the gravity of the meeting by playing on black humour. Furthermore, the lines on which the section ends (‘It is like a solemn pact between the survivors.// The mayor has signed it on behalf of the freemasonry.// The priest has sealed it on behalf of all the rest.’) suggest an East-German setting, since in post-war Eastern Germany the relative cooption of the Church into the official regime did not result in a deeper confrontation with the nation’s past, and the priests’ attitude could later be attacked as further evidence of the Church’s passive reaction to the moral disaster represented by Nazism.²³⁴

Afterwards, the speaker’s ruminations declare their own provisionality by means of ironical assertiveness and threatening allusion: the visit at the cemetery does not take place in daylight; the ‘houses of the dead’ are *still* being dismantled. In the sixth and seventh scenes, instead, the speaker appropriates the young lady’s viewpoint, though not her voice. Her, and the city’s, past is thus exposed by fragments: the nameplates which were laid within empty coffins after the war are imaginatively placed back on the doors; the city where her uncle used to work is conjured up through references to professions and trade which flourished in the idealised pre-war years; distant memories are re-enacted only to be blurred by gruesome detail (the doctor was a ‘skin specialist’). In the eighth scene, instead, the speaker disappears: the voice belongs to a man – one

²³⁴ See Hulse, ‘The New Line of Wit: Zur Zeitgenössischen Britischen Lyrik’, in *Britische Lyrik der Gegenwart*, ed. by Häfner, pp. 241-58.

of the ‘survivors’ – who apparently intervenes only to stress the impossibility of sharing memories.

The sequence’s external frame ultimately suggests a particular relation to the German setting that is being depicted. An Audenesque trait in Fenton is the presence of a figure moulded on wry inquirers and updated to fit the cliché of thriller and crime patterns. His (it is usually ‘his’) function is to reveal hidden idiosyncrasies and untold truths, and to denounce dissonance between ordinary social exchange and repressed meaning. In some of Fenton’s most appreciated poems, ‘A Staffordshire Murderer’ (*Memory* 58-61) or ‘Nest of Vampires’, this character connects rather effectively Fenton’s psychological and more largely historical interests. Uniquely in ‘A German Requiem’, however, the ‘questioner’ inhabits the poem as a speaker, who can mimic the survivors’ silence but not pierce it through. Fenton’s typical use of ‘a factitious decisiveness in the language [through] the Audenesque manipulation of articles and the suggestion of common ground between reader and text which may well not exist’²³⁵ is reversed: a common ground is shown to exist among the ‘victims’, from which the speaker is ostensibly excluded. This distinction is functional. Fenton’s Requiem’ addresses the question of ‘German identity’ which, though inherent in the cultural memory of the whole of Europe since 1945, and properly retrieved only as the other half of Europe resurfaced in the eighties, used to have and still retains a specific and problematic meaning for Germany. In the mid-eighties, this cumbersome specificity was stressed by the republication of Theodor Adorno’s most explicit reflection about the German identity, his article ‘On the Question: What is German?’. In Adorno’s view, asking the very question ‘what is German’, in order to denounce the Germans’ troublesome relation to their past, ‘desecrates the irreparable experiences of the last decades [since] it presupposes an autonomous collective entity, “German,” whose characteristics are then determined after the fact’ (that is, after the explosion of national-socialism and its consequences.)²³⁶ As he recognized, a strong ideal of abstract nationality was also, though not exclusively, an element of national-socialism. Since 1945, German memory has indeed been

²³⁵ O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p. 215.

²³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘On the Question: “What is German?”’, *New German Critique* 36 (1985), 111-121, p. 121.

exposed to a unique collective imputation of guilt and being a survivor meant, for the first generation which Fenton mentions in his poem, to face the burden of responsibility for the Nazi years.

While in Berlin, Fenton attended a cycle of seminars on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or the process of ‘working over the past’ – a section of memory studies which has flourished all over Europe in the late twentieth century. This certainly added to the way ‘Requiem’ leads, again in an Audenesque way, ‘to politics through psychology’. As O’Brien remarks, ‘matters of the psyche are [...] at the centre of Fenton’s work, as they were of Auden’s, and Fenton follows Auden into the production of psychically charged landscapes.’²³⁷ In ‘Requiem’ this dimension, as well as any direct reference to the memory of Nazism, lies of course outside the actual scope of the sequence. Fenton’s poem balances between the poles of commemoration and memory in so far as they are both coextensive with oblivion and with the need to, the eagerness to, forget. Memory lies in what the city has materially removed, which is the only landscape Fenton chooses to depict: the ‘Ruinenland’, essential to the post-war iconography of German cities, is replaced by (either imaginary or real) neat ‘fresh cemeteries’; no setting is provided for the abortive (self) interrogation of the victims.

The estranged reference to commemoration and the blurred presence of Berlin seem to stress the resurgent interest in places fraught with contending historical meanings (former war theatres, sites of memorial interest, and sites of institutional memorialisation, such as museums) which found large resonance in Germany; German historians and sociologists alike stressed the dynamics of post-war reconstruction as related to the sedimentation of living memory and its passage to cultural memory. Because they blended reconverted and socialised spaces (neighbourhoods built during the Nazi years) with unattended, abandoned war-sites or landscapes of ruins, cityscapes proved particularly stimulating. The friction between the two could reveal unbalanced dynamics of memory which ‘official forms of remembering’ seemed to hide. This friction might have been captured by Fenton as he was in the German capital: the conceptual and visual compression of memory and obliteration in his Berlin – deliberately seen

²³⁷ O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p. 214.

as a place of memory rather than as a ‘living’ cityscape – may thus hint at a question raised by Pierre Nora in his analysis of the disrupting potential of sites (*lieux*) that are no longer environments (*milieux*), where memory normally crystallises:

[the] *lieux de memoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. They make appearance by virtue of the deritualization of the world.²³⁸

Fenton’s poem discloses a dimension where rituals are shown as ineffective, in so far as private and public memory are essentially occluded. The cathartic potential of commemoration is effectively neutralised by the poem’s insistence on forgetting and moving ahead, on the ordinary kind of ‘recollection’ (18) which is constantly being put off: ‘It will pass, young lady, it will pass’ (11); ‘The better for the widow, that she should not live in fear/ of surprise...’ (13) ‘But come. Grief must have its term? Guilt too, then’ (18). To the speaker, the very end of gathering together seems, in fact, ‘not to know’ and to obliterate the past, though ‘he’ reaches the same conclusion: ‘Nothing more need be said, and it is better that way’ (12).

Fenton’s resistance to posing the question as exclusively ‘German’ will be stressed later on, but his sequence might be primarily associated to an outsider’s response to the possible impact of memory on German soil. As Timothy Garton Ash has often remarked, the memory of the end of the Second World War has been for decades the most important ideological glue all over Western Europe except for Germany.²³⁹ What this country could not share with Western countries but shared instead with the (then still impenetrable) other side of Europe was the impossibility to subscribe a narrative of moral victory. This element of German self-consciousness is emphasised by the deliberate anachronism and nonrepresentational strategies in Fenton’s depiction of Berlin. Absence of loco-specific references and vagueness are instrumental to the interplay between the present and the past or between perception and internalised memory which is enacted by the various sections. In the fifth scene, verbal tenses provide an unexpected,

²³⁸ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: “Les Lieux de Memoire”’, *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-25, p.12.

²³⁹ See Garton Ash, ‘Bad Memories’ and ‘Trials, Purges and History Lessons’, *History of the Present*, pp. 286-93 and pp. 294-314.

half-surreal superposition of cityscape and wartime graveyards that shifts the focus away from the present and back to the gapped past:

So the squares and parks were filled with the eloquence
of young cemeteries:
the smell of fresh earth, the improvised crosses
and all the impossible directions in brass and enamel

In the lines preceding such surreal vision, moreover, Fenton's speaker introjects the very dynamics of mnemonic occlusion: 'When so many had died, so many and at such speed, // there were no cities waiting for the victims': the speaker's claim defies understatement. His generalising attitude is too marked, summary overtones are too overtly implausible not to remind readers of the distinctions his words elude. Like that of 'survivors', the designation of 'victims' is elliptical and broad enough to raise debate.

On the one hand, the claim is metaphorically true if the term 'victims' designates the victims of Nazi crimes and deportation, for whom, in fact, no cities were there when war ended. But of course, most victims (together with the victims of the Allies' aerial bombings) died; most who had gone away did *not* return. On the other hand, the claim might be understood as literal if the image of the victims referred to the victims of persecution who came back, and above all to the Jewish population. Although many have assumed that Fenton may allude to Jews as 'the victims',²⁴⁰ references to the Jewish German people surface only in the young lady's memory, through the use of Jewish-sounding names (again, black humour is implicit, as the term 'Gliedschirm' literally means 'condom'). Humour is however counterbalanced by the initial reference to the young woman's reassuring invisibility: 'see, he has not noticed you. No one has noticed you' (p.12). Once more, the reference is not clear: the desire of being unnoticed might well apply to the 'tainted generation' of survivors or, more delicately, to the relatives of the actual victims of Nazism. If at all, Fenton's remark seems to address the Jewish question indirectly, by suggesting a different condition of victimhood: those who returned did not find any city waiting for them, as German, and Western European, reintegration of them was officially

²⁴⁰ See Gioia, 'The Rise of J.F.', pp. 29-30; Grant, 'The Voice of History', p. 176 and Robinson, *Instabilities*, pp. 3-5.

tolerated but often rendered virtually impossible. The codedly political implications of the ‘Requiem’ lie in its semantic non-specificity, but they are totally consistent, as will be shown later on, with Fenton’s well-rooted concern with deracination and the ‘West’’s confrontation with other victims of war.

The topicality of Fenton’s work is worth considering. Fenton has observed that ‘writing this poem in Berlin, when [he] showed it to friends, they knew what [he] was talking about. Publishing it in England first of all, it seemed very weird and strange.’²⁴¹ Introducing the ‘Requiem’ to German readers, Michael Hulse stresses Fenton’s discordance with cultural images of the German people he regards as well-rooted in British and European historical imagination, and praises Fenton’s way of tackling such a delicate issue for Germany: ‘Fenton displays much more sensitivity than his contemporaries, who are by and large satisfied with casting Germans as either fanatic Nazis or sweating bumpkins, [...] he confronts us with socio-historically grounded ethics.’²⁴²

Precisely because of such topicality the poem is far from uncontroversial. While the need to face the past resurfaced between the late seventies and the eighties, signalling the beginning of a wider, European process of recognition, this process proved altogether very slow. In its deflection of narrative purpose, the sequence stages such reluctance quite palpably; this strategy is finally laid bare as a response to the wilful withholding of memories which frames the arresting gesture of the survivor’s wife at the end of the last section: ‘His wife nods, and a secret smile, // Like a breeze with enough strength to carry one dry leaf // Over two pavingstones, passes from chair to chair.’(19) Here, Fenton shows an effective, Audenesque concern with gestures and expressive physicality; if an ‘irreducible privacy of reference [...] tauntingly deconstructs [...] efforts at thematic linking’,²⁴³ obliquity is achieved also by making detail symbolic of a wider socio-psycho situation.

²⁴¹ Motion, ‘An Interview with J.F.’, p. 20.

²⁴² ‘Fenton angeht dieses Thema mit weitaus mehr Feingefühl als seine Englische Zeitgenossen, die sich im Grossen und Ganzen immer noch damit zufriedengeben, die Deutschen entweder als fanatische Nazis oder schwitzende Bauerntempel zu sehen [...] Er ist eine der Stärken in Fentons besten Gedichten, dass er uns mit einer sozio-historische Moralität konfrontiert’. Hulse, ‘The New Line of Wit’, p.246. My translation.

²⁴³ Robinson, *Instabilities*, p. 14.

In his recent discussion of the legacy of World War II in unified Germany, Garton Ash mentions Fenton's poem and looks back approvingly at the nexus the poet establishes between the dynamics of 'working over the past' and the sense of responsibility which has always been both obliquely admitted and resisted by the Germans. This seems to underlie the survivor's allegations in the eighth section, where his dismissive considerations are the verbal equivalent of his wife's nodding:

But come. Grief must have its end? Guilt too, then.
and there is no limit to the resourcefulness of
recollection.
[...]
Oh, if I were to begin, if I were to begin to tell you
the half, the quarter, a mere smattering of what we
went though! (18)

In relation to pre-Wall and post-Wall policies of memory, Fenton's sequence looks both diagnostic and farsighted: the switch from obsessive re-elaboration to abrupt disavowal has actually been regarded as central to the legacy the pre-1989 world handed down on the post-Wall Germany:

With unification has come a strong inclination to say, 'enough is enough.'
Germany has done its penance through forty years of division, with the East
Germans [...] bearing a disproportionate part of the burden. You cannot walk
forever in sackcloth and ashes.²⁴⁴

After 1989, as well as in the years of Cold War re-escalation, 'Eastern Germany' seemed both to add to and somehow replace such hypertrophic memory. It was a side effect of the enduring deterrent strategy which 'is by now very familiar to German readers, and which even in the English Speaking world has put "Stasi" next to Gestapo as a synonym for evil'.²⁴⁵ Considering that Fenton lived in Berlin in the same years as Ash, to whom 'A German Requiem' is dedicated, the relevance of Fenton's poem to pre-Wall but above all post-Wall policies of memory should be stressed.

²⁴⁴ Garton Ash, 'Fathers and Sons', *History of the Present*, pp. 130-6, p. 133.

²⁴⁵ Garton Ash, 'Bad Memories', p. 280.

As a matter of fact, Fenton eschews the most prominent element of the cultural representations of Cold War Berlin, that is to say, its division. His detachment from what were palpable ideological pressures in the early eighties has been underlined: ‘the imaginative process of selectively recreating the past eventually becomes not only the survivors’ tactic for living with the burden of history but also Fenton’s aesthetic of writing political poetry [for] although ‘A German Requiem’ deals with a political subject, the poem avoids any specific political attachments or ideology.’²⁴⁶ Distance from political discourse and from the city’s division provides Fenton’s poem with precious insights into the very mood which paved the way for a re-direction of painful memories into a more collective retrieval of memory: questions of responsibility are not verbalised, as the ‘guilty’ survivors also cast themselves as victims – a point which in a few years was to raise endless debate. Once more, it is formal strategy that alerts readers to Fenton’s political discourse. Whereas generalisation about war and victimhood carries ambivalent implications, distance from the remorseful survivors’ moral horizon is emphasised by Fenton’s use of tropes. In the middle of the sequence, as the survivor is speaking, the poem actually shifts to a metaphoric register:

So that a man might say and think:
 When the world was at its darkest,
 When the black wings passed over the rooftops
 (and who can divine His purposes?), even then
 there was always, always a fire in this hearth.

Together with the comparison at the end of the sequence, this is Fenton’s only concession to traditional imagery in a sequence where ‘metaphorical exuberance is out [and] the resultant impersonality suggests a form of reasoning that we are more likely to think of as ‘scientific’ than ‘poetic’.²⁴⁷ The poignancy of metaphor is nevertheless denied by its assimilation to trite cliché (including the eschatological vision of ‘divining God’s purposes’) and, on an intertextual level, by its association to one of the most contested images of the Second World War in Anglophone literature: the dark dove in Eliot’s *Little Gidding*, which in Fenton’s reading symbolises the

²⁴⁶ Gioia, ‘The Rise of James Fenton’, p. 30.

²⁴⁷ Carol Rumens, ‘War and Grief’, *Poetry Review* 72:4 (1983), p.51.

recovery of a 'metaphysical centre' in a poet confronted with the general destruction brought about by war (*Strength of Poetry*, p.79). However ironically, Fenton's sequence asserts its retrenchment from meta-historical readings in the only moment where memories of war are about to be addressed, and one of the survivor is 'heard' speaking.

Fenton detached himself from the biased question of Germany's political division by addressing a theme which survived the age of division. Although the emotion glimpsed in a man willing to talk about the Hitler years failed to turn into poetry, the groundtone of German silence finally triggered Fenton's return to verse. Harald Husemann has remarked the exceptionality of Fenton's hallucinatory treatment of Berlin, which leads back to the question of temporal dislocation as well. The city (never indicated as Berlin yet invariably recognised as such) is actually a carefully wrought compound of present and past: the memorial service, which might refer to commemorations which took place on both sides of the Wall in the eighties, is superimposed on fleeting glimpses of the cityscape in the aftermath of war. Described as 'apocalyptic',

the opening of the graves only reveals the grotesque effect of the enclosed doorplates and business signs [...] The Germans would rather repress the war crimes, the genocide of the Jews, the Gestapo and its terror, the miscarriage of justice in the political verdicts of the *Volkgerichtshof*.²⁴⁸

Of course, Husemann makes explicit all that in the poem is left unspoken: the strict relationship between psychosocial and judicial questions is not articulated by Fenton, although it might have stimulated his interest, as his review of Hochhuth's play reveals. Fenton's play on surreal and photo-negative effects reminds readers of the aesthetic of absence which is regarded as crucial to the German representation of Berlin in the eighties: the shattered city of Berlin, suspended between present and past, 'form[s] part of a self-conscious reference system that is indicative of the ultimate demise of Berlin being itself part of the mythology of the invisible city'.²⁴⁹ Fenton's poem highlights this kind of atmosphere by making actual mappings impossible through the

²⁴⁸ Harald Husemann, *As Others See Us: Anglo-German Perceptions* (Frankfurt am Mein: P. Lang, 1994), pp. 57-58.

²⁴⁹ Keith Dullivant, 'The Divided City: Berlin in Post-War German Literature', in Derek Glass, Dietmar Roesler and John J. White eds., *Berlin: Literary Images of a City* (Berlin: Schmidt Verlag, 1989), pp. 162-77.

superposition of past and present images: the city works thus both as a site for memory (being the ‘Shuttle’'s destination in the present time) and a site of memory (being the landscape of ruins to which Berlin was reduced).

This oblique handling of spatial and temporal dimension is consistent with the impact the sequence ascribes to the memory of war. ‘Imagination and memory are but one thing...’ (p.9): the poem’s epigraph, taken from Hobbes, seems to key to Fenton’s working principle rather than to the subject of the poem: it is actually on a poetic level and thanks to its silent questioner, that the poem distorts what Paul Ricoeur calls *anamnesis*, ‘the effort to recall’ the past as distinct from ‘simple evocation’, while it points to the obscene memories which haunt ‘them’.²⁵⁰ Memory and imagination may thus feed on the same source – images of war, death, destruction crystallised in memory – only as far as Fenton’s use of imagination helps him to adhere to, rather than investigating, the corrugations of what is unspoken.

Referring to ‘A German Requiem’, Fenton claims:

the poem [...] expresses one’s experience and memory of history in a country which is Germany but not just Germany: i.e., a country which has been through a traumatic experience of that kind. It could equally have been called ‘An Italian Requiem’.²⁵¹

Since Italy provides no casual parallel to the German experience, this argument seems partly limited, yet it shows how Fenton did not originally mean to question exclusively Germany’s compromised relation to the past. Whereas Fenton’s original title ‘Elegy’ was soon replaced by a term that eschews lyrical implications while providing a musical metaphor only partially sustained by the poem’s structure, it was only after testing first responses in England that Fenton added the adjective ‘German’. His reluctance to stress the local specificity of controversial questions raised by his poem reflects politics inherent in contemporary discussions and in novels such as Walter Abish’s *How German is It* (1980), where the Jewish German main character finds himself ‘returning from the edge of forgetfulness’ once back to his native town, where ‘clusters of carefully reconstructed buildings [...] are an attempt to replicate entire neighborhoods

²⁵⁰ See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 27-36.

²⁵¹ Motion, ‘Interview with J.F.’, p. 21.

obliterated in the last war'.²⁵² From a different perspective, Abish also uses, or more specifically erases, the cityscape in order to disclose fractures in the German people's dealing with their own past. The notion of 'obliteration' which runs through the novel condenses what in Fenton's sequence are the interbreeding strains of memory, oblivion and amnesia. At the same time, this virtual erasure, like the non-specificity of geographical referents, also serves to frame the novel into the wide question of European reconstruction. While recognising the need to fill in the gaps of post-war history, Abish points to the risk of generalising attitudes to the 'German question'. Fenton might be stressing the same point, though his remark also reveals the attempt to find emblematic value in the historical situation he tackles.

A short reflection on some sections of another long poem thematically linked to the 'Requiem', 'Children in Exile', might expose the opposite pulls crucial to Fenton's notion of commitment once he dropped his aspirations to journalism: the importance of local specificity and historical truth (as 'seen in terms of the particular experience of the particular people involved') and the importance of stylisation or rather, as Grant puts it, the 'telescoping of history' which in the compound collection *The Memory of War and Children in Exile* runs from the already quoted 'Wind' to the opening section of the title-poem. Fenton's filtered approach to the lasting disruptions fuelled by repressed memory in Germany is matched by his treatment of Cambodian diaspora in 'Children in Exile'. In the introduction to his reading of the poem, Fenton lays bare the twin questions of memory and trauma: the sequence actually revolves on the difficult integration of children refugees who escaped war on the border between Thailand and Cambodia at the time of the Khmer Rouge and were eventually taken in by an American family living in Italy 'who assumed that because they lived in a particularly idyllic setting, this would be something of a relief for the children and their mother [...] but who found out, much to their

²⁵² Walter Abish, *How German Is It* (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 9 and 3. The novel centres on the adventures of Ulrich Burgenau, a Jewish German exile who returns to Germany in the early fifties to visit relatives and friends who survived the war and started anew. Set in the invented city of Brumholdstein, it exposes the repression of recent memories in the early post-war years by focusing on the material removal and gapped reconstruction of the town.

surprise, that there were new fears' for the children who, still traumatised, suddenly found themselves starting anew in a small country outside Florence.²⁵³

As he makes clear in *All the Wrong Places*, Cambodia was particularly affecting for Fenton. In poems like 'Cambodia' (*Memory of War*, 23), personal involvement is kept at bay and gives way to an uncompromising denunciation of war which foreshadows the ethical depth but also the political limits of Fenton's engagement in the nineties, where his contribution to new Manichean divisions risks to become shallow, as happens with his poem 'Jerusalem'.²⁵⁴ In 'Children in Exile', reticence and silence over the dramatic consequences of war and auto-genocide in the Cambodian people prevail on the poet and journalist. After dramatising the anarchy which helped Pol Pot's coup in the almost comic tones of 'Dead Soldiers', Fenton shifted in fact to an altogether different political subject, that of the presence and the relevance of refugees to the Western world:

They have found out: it is hard to escape from
Cambodia,
hard to escape the justice of Pol Pot,
When they are called to report in dreams to their
tormentors.
One night is merciful, the next is not.

I hear a child moan in the next room and I see
The nightmare spread like rain across his face
And his limbs twitch in some vestigial combat
In some remembered place.

Oh, let us not be condemned for what we are.
It is enough to account for what we do. (*Memory of War*, 30)

The poem does not shun fierce attack on America as representative of the Western coalition which was also deemed responsible, 'by proxy', for the tragedy:

For it is we, not they, who cannot forgive America,
And it is we who travel, they who flee,

²⁵³ James Fenton, 'Introduction' to *The Poetry Quartets 3* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), Tape 1, Side A, Selection 2.

²⁵⁴ James Fenton, 'Jerusalem', in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 56-59.

We who may chose exile, they who are forced out (35)

Yet Fenton's critique in this respect is blunted, as Europe and America are also seen as possible destinations for the distant victims of Cold War confrontation. After touching on memories of the Cambodian tragedy and denouncing the essentialist substratum which underlay Pol Pot's genocide (since he condemned part of his people 'for what they were'), Fenton's poem also raises questions inherent in the survivors' integration in a totally new reality.

Narrative is more linear than in 'A German Requiem' and the effort to designate the children's condition as emblematic of many other situations is testified by the broader space devoted to the speaker's argument – the didactic line which is also, if in a self-deflating way, pursued in 'A German Requiem'. Where the 'Requiem' both challenges and teases readers by means of compression and defamiliarization, 'Children in Exile' is partially diminished by digression and dilution.

Fenton's willingness to broaden the ethical and historical horizon of British poetry by questioning the moral situation of the West and of Western Europe in particular across the second half of the century is remarkable. Fenton might well epitomise the gradual disempowerment of far leftist commitment, and the conscious limits of an autochthonous poetry of witness; yet his early engagement with the theme of memory has paved the way for challenging international and European perspectives endorsed by his fellow poets in the years that followed. Their European orientation ran against the grain of both political and poetic discourse, which in the 'new generation' of the nineties register a blend of insularism and often casual third-worldism.

The times when 'James Fenton/ read Shakespeare in Saigon,/ got the complete works/ in dime paperbacks/ on the black market'²⁵⁵ are over; before going back to Oxford as a professor, however, Fenton engaged self-critically with the possibility for writers to 'make history' reflecting individual concerns with how the interplay between memory (belonging to them as well as to the 'Other') and history might be articulated. Sharing with him the temptation of

²⁵⁵ Tom Paulin, 'Waftage: An Irregular Ode' in *FivemileTown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), pp.6-7.

‘reportage’, Harrison, Szirtes and Smith were to show more clearly the effort to reconstitute memory handed down in ‘flare-ups illuminating new conflicts and new divisions.

Besides, if English poetry absorbed too quietly the fractures brought about by mid-century events, as a poet and as a critic Fenton addressed other historical coordinates, and has thus opened the way eastwards by benefiting from distance the generation which more strictly grew up acknowledging the value of Central and Eastern European witnesses probably could not assume. This emerges in the way History intrudes in his poetry. Amongst the younger poets who emerged in the eighties, Fenton is the one who first brought the legacy of Nazism and of the Second World War to contemporary literate consciousness. Fenton’s formal approach to his subject matter, his indirection and selective address to memory refrains from appropriation and vicarious re-enactment: it questions the very process of working over the past rather than voicing the moral and psychic elements which contribute to such a process.

One of the few young critical voices of Fenton’s generation, Sean O’Brien, points to the relevance of Fenton’s historical concern in his *Deregulated Muse*, a survey on contemporary poetry which does not fail to register the otherwise dominant tendency to dehistoricization in English verse. But in so far as O’Brien claims that the subject of the poem ‘is the Holocaust’, his reading sounds misleading. Nazism and the Holocaust are, the reader infers, behind the ‘psychic strains of amnesia’²⁵⁶ ascribed to ‘them’/the Germans throughout the poem, and are part of the repressed memory which the speaker cannot fathom out. The background of ‘Requiem’ is certainly the unresolved question which the first-generation of post-war writers, and especially former GDR poets like Hans Magnus Enzensberger continued to raise once the Cold War was over:

Germany, my country, unholy heart of the nations
Pretty notorious, more so every day
Among ordinary people elsewhere

My two countries and I, we’ve gone separate ways
And still I am wholly here
In sackcloth and ashes, and ask:

²⁵⁶ O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p.214.

What is my business here?²⁵⁷

Rather than the past (or its disquieting reverberations in the post-communist Germany, which was partly Enzensberger's point after 1989), reconstruction, material not less than moral, is the burning issue with which Fenton chose to engage. In reply to the uneasiness voiced by authors such as Enzensberger and Abish, Fenton's poem displays a sort of obliquity which tackles the unspoken tangentially:

Though some of Fenton's poetry courts the danger of turning early Audenesque portentousness into postmodernist affectation, 'A German Requiem' takes on a haunting depth; he has created an ideal poetic vehicle for expressing, not just the inexpressible, but the fact of inexpressibility [...] giving voice to the pervasively oppressive presence of concealment.²⁵⁸

Incommunicability, within the community and outside it, seems the object of Fenton's preoccupation with how such memory affects the present.

Fenton's early attempt to draw near to the 'other' European territory is telling. The memory of Nazism is a leitmotiv in the work of all his fellow writers, alongside communism and even, in the case of Smith, communist labour camps and Eastern European anti-Semitism; they all engaged with indirect witness and with the possibility of framing it in the present. Fenton's indirection reminds one of Antony Rowland's discussion of 'awkward poetics', which will be addressed at some length in the following chapter, in relation to Harrison's *Prometheus*. Discussing the emergence of the theme of Nazism and of the Shoah in English-speaking poets, Rowland has coined the phrase 'awkward poetics' to designate poetic strategies – including 'camp' mode, self-reflexivity, and the use of received images connected with Nazi crimes – which pinpoint the poet's very remoteness from the demanding intellectual, moral and emotional charge lying in primary or secondary witness:

Poets concerned with the epistemological question of the Holocaust gain access to its historical reality [...] Post-Holocaust poetry can be distinguished from the literature of postmemory in that [...] deep personal connection is absent from the

²⁵⁷ H.M.Enzensberger, 'Language of the Country'[1968] in *Selected Poems*, transl. by Michael Hamburger (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 19.

²⁵⁸ Gareth Reeves, 'This is plenty', p. 587.

background of the poets but is replaced with their determination to provide ethical responses to the events in Europe between 1933 and 1945.²⁵⁹

Conscious ‘inexpressibility’, detached allusion is a favourite mode for older poets than either Harrison or Fenton: Geoffrey Hill (or even Sylvia Plath, in Rowland’s reading) epitomise the wider disabling consciousness which kept poets at a remove from the founding, traumatic narratives of twentieth-century history. Claiming no more right to appropriate those narratives than their forerunners did, Fenton’s and Harrison’s generation provided a different kind of ethical response to Nazism, and to a lesser extent the crimes of Western democracies and of Communism (both the Great Terror and the much less explored totalitarianism against which Central and Eastern European poets aligned themselves in the second half of the century). They were born late yet not so late as to shun the shadows cast by places which have been recently pointed as ‘cultural icons’ of European memory, ‘Auschwitz’, ‘Kolyma’ and ‘Hiroshima’.²⁶⁰ Addressing those shadows through their journeys has certainly been consistent with a strategic shift from the silence imposed by any definite cultural concretion to a more straightforward evocation of places where memory could and would not ‘crystallise’. This is why Fenton’s ‘Requiem’ retains an exceptional role in the dialogue between English poetry and Europe around one of the most relevant historical and cultural questions of pre- and post-Wall European self-consciousness.

²⁵⁹ Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp.1-2.

²⁶⁰ On the cultural value of death camps, the gulag and the atom bombs as central icons of the twentieth-century historical imagination see Enzo Traverso, ‘Fire Alarms’ in *The Twentieth Century and Its Crimes*, ed. by Marcello Flores. Proceedings of the conference (University of Siena, 16-18 March 2000) available on <<http://www.unisi.it/ammin/communi/century/video.htm>> [16 March 2007]

IV TONY HARRISON

IV.1 Memory, politics and imagination: radicalism in Harrison's early work

James Fenton's 'Requiem' pointed to the region of Central Europe which became more and more nuclear to the question of European integration and to the role historical memory as a marker of identity was to play; with considerable effort to embrace the Other's viewpoint, it also opened to a tangible problem brought about by the material re-emergence of a whole topography of 'traumascapes' during and after the eighties.²⁶¹ Fenton's estranged viewpoint foreshadowed the distanced and distancing approach to mid-century history shared by poets who necessarily bore to it secondary witness,²⁶² but it also displayed the poet's distinctive caution in raising issues which were to become more than ever liable to ideological debate. Ten years older than Fenton, Tony Harrison resumed his fellow poet's attempt to de-insulate English historical consciousness: his selective, yet sharp focus on traumascapes like Dresden and Auschwitz was a late response to the memory of Second World War which buttressed the founding myth of Western post-war democracy, and to the relative obliteration of Nazism during the Cold War years. All this brought Harrison to stumble into Germany: in different ways, he turned it into the

²⁶¹ Following Maurice Halbwachs' and Pierre Nora's notion of collective memory as a socio-cultural construct, Aleida Assmann has produced a sort of mnemonic topography of 'Traumenorten' (traumascapes) associated to places of memory which play a specific role in twentieth-century European historical self-identification and where sedimented or crystallised meaning is dialectically related to their function within the surrounding environment: residual ruins in European cities, concentration camps, memorial monuments, recreated urban environments are thus analysed by articulating the relation between cultural and communicative memory, private and collective fruition, setting and environment where memory is literally seen to take place. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Beck, 1999).

²⁶² Discussions of post-war, and more specifically post-Holocaust literature across the East/West divide have typically underlined the chasm between the literature of (primary) witness and the literature of 'secondary witness'. See Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*, pp. 3-10. This distinction is functional to the present study because the reception of Central and East European writers in the West has been strongly influenced by the idea that they could bear direct witness to experiences, like Nazism or the Second World War, which Western writers were loath to face directly. On the other hand, writers who spoke about these experiences, like Primo Levi, had to wait until the late eighties to see their most controversial work published.

locus and focus of a *European* question, which was brought about by the inevitable centrality this country acquired after 1989.

Long after 1945, the afterimage of German Nazism and of Germany as the enemy of war continued to lie at the intersection between German national self-identification and the representation of Germany in the Anglosphere.²⁶³ Around the early eighties, it was not necessarily contemporary GDR which represented a nightmarish vision. Rising self-criticism on the part of free, Western Europe affected the kind of political and moral supremacy which was legitimated and secured by the East/West divide. No writer would be so radical as to let the nightmare of right-wing totalitarianism surface beneath the Western fear of communism, as Ken Loach did in *Fatherland*. The deterrent use of the ‘red scare’, nevertheless, faded before the actual collapse of the Cold War confrontation, so that the equally deterrent preoccupation with the legacy of Nazism emerged quite distinctly. To borrow from historian Ernst Nolte’s notorious article, ‘the past did not pass’²⁶⁴ but still impinged on present Germany and on present Europe. The nightmare of the possible projection of that past into the present was ushered into fiction and this process intensified as soon as the Wall came down. The reconfiguration of high Cold War subgenres such as the thriller, the spy novel, and dystopia into fictional frames that replaced Eastern Communism with Nazism was a telling signal: from Les Deighton’s early dystopic novel *SS-GB* to Robert Harris’s post-Wall thriller *Fatherland*, writers of alternate history manifested British susceptibility to the untarnished memory of Western (and Germany-led) totalitarianism, to the point of imagining a Nazified Western Europe.²⁶⁵

In poetry, this kind of political imagination simply failed to take shape, despite the left-wing sympathies of many leading personalities. The need to reconsider the historical experience of the Second World War and of Nazism, instead, haunted writers in such a way that the effort to remember slowly became crucial. Tony Harrison was the most outspoken among British poets about this ‘duty to memory’, although he effectively brought up the subject relatively late, in his

²⁶³ See Husemann, *As Others See Us*, pp.37-50.

²⁶⁴ Ernst Nolte, ‘The Past that Will not Pass’, in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?* ed. by Ernst Piper (Humanities Press: Atlantic Heights, N.J, 1993). Nolte’s article, which officially started revisionist debate in Germany, was first published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in June 1986.

²⁶⁵ Les Deighton, *SS-GB* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979) and Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (London: Arrow, 1992).

rare, recent theoretical essays. ‘Facing up to the Muses’, which is included in the introduction to his *Collected Film Poetry*, illuminates Harrison’s ethic and aesthetic position in relation to what he regards as the moral engagement elicited by Greek theatre (his versions from Aristophane and Aeschylus have been widely praised).²⁶⁶ Harrison examines the intersemiotic language of Greek theatre, thus reminding readers of Auden’s evaluation of the communal dimension of drama.²⁶⁷ The mediating power of the dramatic role of the messenger, and the distancing power of the mask are, in his view, particularly apt to both channel and contain annihilating and potentially nihilistic aspects of late twentieth-century historical consciousness:

This weariness of the nine [Muses], this erosion of the affirmative spirit in our times, this darkness, this *nephos* on Helicon has been made darker by two World Wars, the terrors of Nazism, and the fearful conflagrations unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, creating the literal *poliokrotaphoi* of Hesiod’s Fifth Age [...] It is not only our lateness in history but the dark catastrophes of our century that undermine creativity at its very roots [...], it’s the frenzy and despair of the fifth age of mankind, the Iron Age turning its Medusa-like gaze on us. At the time I began feeling my way in life as a poet there was, in reaction to our century’s terrible events, what George Steiner has characterised as a ‘retreat from the word’. Unfortunately for me, while this retreat from the word was happening, I was beginning to acquire what Harold Pinter called my ‘voracious appetite for language’. [...] What are some of the things I think when I stand facing up to the Muses in an ancient theatrical space? How was it, I ask myself, that the Greeks could present the worst things they could imagine, gaze into terror as Nietzsche said, and yet not be turned to stone? The first and most obvious fact about Greek tragedy is that it was played in the full light of day [...] so that the bearing of terror was not only shared but seen to be shared. As it was seen to be shared, so was it communally endured.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Bibliographical references are included in Neil Astley, ‘Selective Bibliography’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 504-10, and in Sandie Byrne, ‘Select Bibliography’, in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, pp. 229-32.

²⁶⁷ ‘Drama began as the act of a whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators [...]’. W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings 1927-39*, ed. by E. Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 273.

²⁶⁸ Harrison, ‘Facing up to the Muses’, p. 441.

Harrison's use of classical models in order to achieve 'communal endurance' and public relief has mostly found accommodation in his theatrical work, especially in the early eighties. As his versions from Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*,²⁶⁹ or Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* show, Harrison starts from contemporary politics – the rising militarism and Cold War deterrence politics in the *Oresteia*, the relentless collapse of the Welfare State and the growing identification between politics and war in *The Common Chorus* – to remould his classical model, working carefully to play history, chronicle and reportage against the metahistorical ineluctability of myth.²⁷⁰ It thus seems natural that Harrison should find the conflation of classical patterns and contemporary meaning in Czech 'official' theatre particularly invigorating as he lived in Prague between 1969 and 1970:

I got many things out of my year in Prague [...] Czechoslovakia was a country with an embattled culture in which the normal aspirations of a writer's work were blocked by censorship, so that translation became a very rich art [...] when a culture is under oppression, the works of the past are continually read as if they were written yesterday. They have to skirt that very narrow line between censorship and subversion [...]²⁷¹

Although it fuelled Harrison's enthusiastic empathy with writers under pressure – 'lips cropped-off a poet [...], that's almost the sort of poet I think I am', he says in 'Guava Libre' (*CP* 56) – the political and social climate of Prague failed to affect his poetry in any sensible way; nor did his contact with East European writers in translation – he later became a co-editor of *Stand* magazine – have any particular formal influence on his poetry. Whereas strategies of 'translation' observed in Prague probably enhanced Harrison's future commitment to explore the political potential of classic drama, to strike a balance between literary/mythological and therefore supra-historical patterns and historical meaning in poetry was for him more

²⁶⁹ Tony Harrison, *The Oresteia: A Trilogy by Aeschylus* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982).

²⁷⁰ By exploring the theme of war in Harrison's main theatrical performances, Rylance provides stimulating insights into the poet's handling of supra-historical meaning. See Rick Rylance, 'Doomsongs: Tony Harrison and War' in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Byrne, pp. 137-60.

²⁷¹ John Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 236-7. Harrison went back to Prague in the mid-eighties, to adapt a translation of Smethana's *The Bartered Bride* which he co-produced in New York in 1985.

problematic. However, concerns embedded in his considerations on drama shed light on the kind of historical imagination Harrison developed between the eighties and the nineties, and will be used to assess Harrison's poetic conflation of contemporary concerns and investigation of recent history.

Deeply aware of 'belatedness in history', Harrison casts himself and his contemporaries as the messengers in Greek drama, whose silence 'first establishes the seeing, and prepares the way for [their] bursting into speech' ('Facing up to the Muses', 446). It is worth remarking that for Harrison the way from silence to speech was quite long. Precisely because of Harrison's 'voracious' appetite for words and of his concern with the constellation of images defining Western self-consciousness, his indirect and fleeting approach to mid-century horrors, from his debut to the mid-eighties literary exploit, is particularly telling. Despite Harrison's palpable awareness of twentieth-century 'catastrophes', neither Nazism nor the Second World War, which were to occupy his later output, were so easily confronted in the full light of day.

Both issues have a specific relevance to Harrison's life-long commitment to the theme of war and to his bleak apprehension of his contemporaries' decreased empathy with all those who 'go down in history': this decrease is regarded by the poet as functional to the enduring and possibly increasing oppression of some classes, peoples, and nations. This line of argument has often seemed, however, too general. Rick Rylance points out how Tony Harrison's work 'begins from a powerfully realized, and morally and historically persuasive, revulsion from war as the driving fact of twentieth-century history', but he sensibly remarks how, especially in his theatre experimentation in the eighties, Harrison's argument is often liable to metahistorical abstraction.²⁷² On the other hand, mid-century history retains a predominantly iconic value in his dramatic work, which is exceptionally fraught with reminders of Nazism, from the SS-like attire of 'his' Commodus in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*,²⁷³ to Aegisthus' black-garbed militia in *The Oresteia*, tokens of a modern police state. In his experiments with drama, Harrison was likely to superpose classic representations of illiberal regimes with Fascist and Nazi iconography: yet this

²⁷² Rylance, 'Doomsongs', p.148.

²⁷³ Tony Harrison, 'The Kaisers of Carnuntum', in *Plays Three* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

aspect of his work, indicative of Harrison's increasing concern with collective imagination in both its 'popular' and 'high art' expression, paradoxically tended to keep 'history' at a safe remove.

In the meantime, the historical experience of Nazism and the attendant question of the Holocaust found relatively little space in Harrison's poetry, while the Second World War already permeated Harrison's historical and political imagination in verse but constituted, up to a point, a separate thread. Echoes of war are palpable in *Loiners* and *From the School of Eloquence*, where memories of his childhood in Leeds often include figures of war refugees – even German refugees, as happens in 'Schwiegermutterlieder':

Mother and daughter German refugees
were not much wanted in nineteen
forty-five. She had to skivvy for rich Jews
in Manchester's posh 'Palestine'.

I never really could believe
her story of your being thrown out
by some, one snowy Christmas Eve,
for having real wax candles on your conifer,
their children shouting: *Kraut! Kraut!*
until she brought the tea-chests out of store.
Then I saw the hotel towels, the stolen
London café spoons (*CP* 51)

'Schiegermutterlieder' might be associated to the few, delicate historical excursions like 'Eggshells' (*Under the Clock* 36-8) which features in Harrison's latest, and otherwise 'anti-German', collection mentioned in the first chapter. Because of their unabashedly lyrical cast, poems like this might seem formally and thematically exceptional to the bulk of texts which now represents 'the essential Harrison' or Harrison as the 'working class' voice of late twentieth century England. Yet they epitomize Harrison's early attempt to register the rising connection between post-war Great Britain and the outer world while appealing to private, inner recollection. This is an aspect of his work English writers have often overlooked, while other British fellow poets, like Douglas Dunn, have immediately praised:

In the work of writers like Philip Larkin, Norman MacCaig, Tony Harrison and Seamus Heaney, lyricism is drawn from an ability to engage with the materials

of ordinary life, and then absorb them, not necessarily to transcend them [...] They prove that poetry begins in reality as much as in the imagination that apprehends it. Much more than a tacit acknowledgement of history and reality underlies their poetry; it is built into the poetry itself [...].²⁷⁴

It is true that Harrison is at his most effective as he overtly harnesses his concern with contemporary politics on personal experience: depressed Yorkshire is more likely to affect readers than any of the ‘exotic scenarios’ depicted in both *Loiners* and *School of Eloquence* (Nigeria, Czechoslovakia, South-America) or indeed, past settings. The balance is not always well tilted, which is why even appreciative readers like Sean O’Brien have lamented Harrison’s early provincialism: ‘the poems’ immediate prehistory [...] is firmly located in the home, with some references to Harrison’s education or to work, but rarely to the larger world, except the end of the Second World War’.²⁷⁵

O’Brien’s focus served to establish Harrison’s reputation as a Northern, former working class presence, whose distant affiliation with E.P. Thompson and Richard Hoggart may account for his non-radicalism. Harrison chose to stress his familial and communal background no less in his poetry than in interviews and public readings. A former ‘scholarship boy’,²⁷⁶ he started out lamenting the loss of working class connections, dramatising a kind of self-division while being ‘pressed to break [his] links with [his] working class background and refusing to do so’, in Richard Hoggart’s words.²⁷⁷ Harrison’s refusal resulted in his recognition of poetic accent and rhythm in the speech of his parents and of the ‘Loiners’, and in his way of fitting lines of colloquial, regional speech into regular metre. At the beginning of his career, his ‘scholarship boy revenge’ was therefore regarded as mildly antagonistic. Many poets who thoroughly identified with the working-class stance, like Tony Flynn, remarked that his stance ultimately

²⁷⁴ Douglas Dunn, ‘Importantly Live’: Harrison’s Lyricism’ in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 254-7, p.254.

²⁷⁵ O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p. 59.

²⁷⁶ See Ken Worpole, ‘Scholarship Boy: The Poetry of Tony Harrison’, *New Left Review* 153 (1985), pp. 63-74.

²⁷⁷ Richard Hoggart, ‘In Conversation with Tony Harrison’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 36- 45, p.38.

failed ‘to ask what is the personal within a radical context’ and to respond to contemporary social disaggregation.²⁷⁸

By detecting a wider dynamics beyond his family history of working class subjugation and silence, however, Harrison extended this narrative of dispossession to encompass the oppression of other regions and peoples at the hand of those who detain ‘eloquence’, the language of dominant ideologies, and the language of History.²⁷⁹ While thorough re-appropriation of working class idiom or appropriation of other ‘languages’ fell outside the scope of Harrison’s ‘working class poetics’, his concern with class implied relocating the struggle for eloquence within a diachronic pattern of domination and marginalisation. On the one hand, this distanced perspective blunted his potential radicalism; on the other hand, the ‘flawed’ articulation of class stance in Harrison’s early work keyed to the evolution his poetry partially underwent between the eighties and the noughts.

Christopher Butler maintains that to regard the regional microcosm evoked in *Loiners* as provincial and politically non-radical hardly draws attention to the filtered, and predominantly dramatic, representation of Harrison’s ‘lost’ class and background, or to his ‘ambivalent relation to a working-class upbringing which is inevitably surrounded by its own stereotypical, quasi literary myth’.²⁸⁰ What illuminates Harrison’s lyricism is partly his robust non-lyrical approach, which includes the stereotypical, the grotesque, and the appeal to both literary and popular imagination. The very use of vignettes in *From The School of Eloquence* suggests how his technique of representation depends on a wilful, almost Dickensian, retreat from realism, on the

²⁷⁸ Tony Flynn, ‘An Interview with John Osborne’, *Bête Noire* 12 (1991), 105-117, p. 111. Harrison, however, has never denied that the division emblemized by his two-fold allegiance to dialect and ‘the Queen’s English’ was too deeply rooted in generational contrasts to be subversive, despite the oft-quoted lines addressed to his father in ‘Book Ends’: ‘back in our silence and sullen looks/ for all the Scotch we drink, what’s still between’s/ not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.’ (CP 137).

²⁷⁹ Part of Harrison’s work of the seventies and the eighties deliberately plays off private incidents against a broad historical background, interrogating a wide spectrum of issues, from British history of colonisation and decolonisation (in monologues such as ‘The Song of the PWD Man’, ‘The Death of the PWD Man’, ‘The White Queen’ and ‘The Heart of Darkness’ in *Loiners*) to the nuclear threat, to the environmental and military questions raised by the implementation of American military outposts in Europe (‘Y’, *The Common Chorus*). Whether he attacks Westerners as neo-imperialists, underlines the disappearance of ethnic and regional minorities, or condemns the gradual erosion of the welfare state, Harrison’s focus is on the general demise of democratic responsibility shown by Western governments.

²⁸⁰ Christopher Butler, ‘Culture and Debate’ in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Byrne, pp. 93-114.

conscious handling of comedy and caricature which puts the ‘outsider, self-proclaiming individual’ into perspective.²⁸¹ This is the case of Harrison’s oft-cited confrontation with a school teacher – the advocate of Standard English – in ‘Them and [uz]’:

áλ, áλ, ay ay! ... stutterer Demosthenes,
 gob full of pebbles outshouting seas –
 4 words of *mi’ art aches* and ... ‘Mine’s broken,
 You barbarian, T.W.!’ *He* was nicely spoken.
 ‘Can’t have our glorious heritage down to death!’

I played the Drunker Porter in Macbeth (*CP* 133)

or of the adolescent’s impatience with his father Harry and ‘working class Sundays’ in ‘Currants’:

Go on! ‘ave an ‘andful. It’s all free.
Not this barrel though. Your sweat’s gone into it.
I’ll go and get my handful from another.

I saw him poise above the currants and then spit:

Next Sunday you can stay ‘ome wi’ yer mother! (CP 164)

Harrison’s steadfast focus is on ‘Harry, the baker worker, [on] Florrie, loving, ambitious for her son, unable to understand why he didn’t become a schoolteacher [and on] the poet’s family background among people whose lack of education and confidence left them inarticulate’:²⁸² one might include ‘granpa Horner’ the cobbler (‘Lines to my Grandfathers I’, *CP* 192) and ‘old chaps’ like Peanut Joe (‘The Pocket Wars of Peanut Joe’, *CP* 18-20). In Harrison’s first collections, readers become acquainted with a whole gallery of characters, working class icons which ultimately disclose the poet’s distance from the community of the ‘Loiners’. Harrison’s father is more likely to appear as the disgruntled, bereaved figure in ‘Book Ends’, once more engaging in language struggle with his son, than as a full-fledged character, the baker ‘worn out on poor pay’; the young hooligan is more likely to impress readers than the dying mining community which inspired Harrison’s own Yorkshire aggro in *V*. Harrison’s conscious attempt to ‘busk the class that broke’ his parents (‘Turns’, *CP* 162) is dramatically enhanced by

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁸² Rosemary Burton, ‘Tony Harrison: An Introduction’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 14-31, p. 17.

references to bourgeois representations of the lower classes, which appropriately hinge on a verbal rather than wider, more nuanced, factual representation of working class life. As the emblem of articulated power struggle, language proves double-edged, being at once the internalised medium of oppression and the means by which poetry can rescue a community ‘whose disappearance from memory allows societies to organise further atrocious vanishings.’²⁸³ Harrison’s ability to ventriloquize class-inflected idioms, to insert ‘Ludding morphemes’ within the ‘frames of Art’ (‘On Not Being Milton’, *CP* 122) has often drawn attention to his notion of poetry ‘as a terrain of struggle where opposing accents intersect [and where] language is cultural warfare.’²⁸⁴ However, Harrison’s early poetry sensibly counterbalances this formal stress on division by adopting discursive and imaginative patterns which, in order to return the voice of history to the dispossessed, turn poetry and vision into sites of reconciliation.²⁸⁵ This might be shown even in a poem such as *V.*, where the Miners’ Strike of 1983-4, the threat of unemployment and of rising disaggregation lurk behind Harrison’s privileged, familiar setting. The skinhead’s rage at his own lack of perspectives is rekindled by the poet’s abortive attempt to ‘speak for’ him or his class (the hooligan is, after all, already a representative of the underclass). Harrison’s speaker does not only furnish with voice, but literally appropriates the hooligan, which turns him into the speaker’s *doppelgänger*:

‘You piss-artist skinhead cunt, you wouldn’t know
And it doesn’t fucking matter you do,
The skin and the poet united fucking Rimbaud
But the *autre* that *je est* is fucking you.’
[...]
*Don’t talk to me of fucking representing
The class yer were born into any more.
Yer going to get ‘urt and start resenting
It’s not poetry we need in this class war* (*CP* 271-3)

²⁸³ Rylance, ‘Doomsongs’, p. 139.

²⁸⁴ Eagleton, ‘Antagonisms’, p. 349.

²⁸⁵ Both Rosemary Burton and Jeffrey Wainwright have pointed to Harrison’s early striving after a kind of unification and reconciliation, which does not depend on perspectival reciprocity: see Burton, ‘Tony Harrison’, and Jeffrey Wainwright, ‘Something to Believe In’, in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp. 409-13.

Such appropriation exposes the speaker's (and Harrison's) adherence to liberal humanism while a series of elements, including the limited range of the skinhead's language markers and the adoption of fictional dialogue, subdue the disrupting and oppositional overtones of Harrison's polyphonic mode.²⁸⁶ Reconciliation works here thanks to both intertextual reference and, significantly, visual associations. Harrison's reference to Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is lent contemporary meaning as the skinhead, strolling about among the tombs, draws the poet's attention to the inscriptions. The community glimpsed through the names of jobs and professions defines a historical and cultural context from which both are excluded. This creates an ideal solidarity between the two, despite their effective social distance and the initial, shocking appearance of the vandalised inscription on the tomb of the speaker's parents. Imaginative markers of reconciliation multiply: as the poem moves to its close, 'v.' shifts from a symbol of antagonism to one of reconciliation as the graveyard stoned the skin is caught vandalising are sprayed with the 'promising' sign of the 'VNITED'. Later on, boys are heard singing 'Here Comes the Bride', as Harrison mentally goes 'home, home to his woman, his bride' and the poem closes on a note of exhilaration. In fact, *V.* keeps tensions unresolved, and the hooligan's adherence to the speaker's humanistic horizon seems to defuse the poem's subversive potential.

Thanks to its imaginative sweep and its consciously flawed dialectic between 'them' and 'us', *V.* is a textbook example of Harrison's critical use of the speaker's outsiderism.²⁸⁷ Harrison dignifies the hooligan's protest while connecting his aerosolled inscriptions to the inevitable silence of his forbears. Harrison's strength lies, however, in the attempt to counteract socio-cultural diagnosis and to let imagination release diverse meanings. Harrison's free-ranging use of literary references and popular iconography is enhanced by his talent for visionary

²⁸⁶ Further discussion of Harrison's language strategy in *V.* is provided by Eagleton, who centres on Harrison's 'Bakhtinian' use of language, and Neil Roberts, who points instead to the limited handling of polyphony and heteroglossia in the poem. See Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Post-War Poetry*, pp. 153-68.

²⁸⁷ The ambivalent radicalism of *V.* owes much to Harrison's adherence to a notion of class and 'civil' war which in the eighties was used by the government to disguise a more radical disaggregation of socio-political forces.

association, which is as relevant to his poetic method as is his stress on eloquence.²⁸⁸ The numbered notebooks which are partly reprinted with his poems and his dramatic and cinematographic texts, are effective reminders of the intuitive visual patterning around which most of his poems cohere. It is on pre-emptive imaginative links that discourse is often structured, thus supporting Harrison's need to 'make connections where [he] can' ('Lines from my Grandparents').

The relevance of images to Harrison's poetics and to his apprehension of cultural and historical sense has been foregrounded by his focus on both individual and collective memories. There as well, it is basically his ability to make 'connections' that brings about disruptive meaning. Harrison's regional perspective on the 'state-of-the-Nation' stance led to his ambivalent reading of the post-war democratic dream²⁸⁹: Harrison's backward look on his lost community in *From the School of Eloquence* undermined the very idea of a quintessential 'English' identity by restaging and 'revising' the 'Loiners' participation to the unique moment of national celebration represented by August 1945. Within the microcosm of Leeds and Yorkshire, the past surfaces beneath ordinary war iconography (cellar 'refuge rooms', Air Raid precautions, war rations on the family's table) mostly by means of 'frames' and apparently meaningless details like iron railings, flags, and finally, street bonfires. Formal strategies, such as the use of narrative rather than dramatic techniques, and the apparently unresolved tension between the child's and the adult's vision, separate these retrospective sections from the rest of Harrison's output. Retrospection emerges in poems like 'The Effort' or in the second part of 'The Morning After':

They took our iron railings down to dump
on Dresden as one more British bomb,
but mam cajoled the men to leave a stump
to hitch the line she hung the washing from (CP 174).

The blood-red ball, first burnt to blackout shreds,

²⁸⁸ Since V., part of Harrison's preparatory work has actually entailed accurate pasting and editing of newspaper articles, passages from various kind of literature (from fiction to travel brochures, to museum tickets and other kind of *trouvailles*) and photography books.

²⁸⁹ The relevance of Harrison's first collections to this strain of British verse is analysed by John Lucas, 'Speaking for England?' in *Tony Harrison*, ed. by Astley, pp.351-61.

Took hovering batwing on the bonfire's heat
Above the *Rule Britannias* and the bobbing heads (CP 197)

Harrison does not, however, delve into the sense of ambivalence which stems from these tensions. Whenever Harrison's early poetry opens to upsetting memories, it defines a zone of historical consciousness which seems both oppressively present and outside the scope of moral and intellectual investigation: readers do not see the blitz, Germany's defeat, or nuclear mushrooms in Japan, though the cultural, iconic value of cities like Coventry, Dresden, and Hiroshima is all-pervasive. Even when 'Auschwitz' is touched on, indirection and story-telling is preferred: a schoolboy's primer is used to ask what impact collective nouns like 'genocide' or 'gulag' might ever have on people who believe in the 'natural' rights of the individual ('First Aid in English', CP 202). For the young lovers looking for some privacy in Leeds cemetery, the sight of a Polish refugee brings to mind the unimaginable smell of evil in 'Allotments' (CP 20-1). Verbal play adds to hyperbolic use of historical references here, and grotesque deflation pervades the poem:

The Pole who caught us at it once had smelt
far worse at Auschwitz and at Buchenwald,
he said, and, pointing to the chimneys, *Meat!*
zat it vere zey murder vat you eat.
and jogging beside us, *As man devours*
ze flesh of animals, so worms devour ours.
it's like your anthem, Ilkla Moor Baht' at (CP 20)

Significantly, the balance between familiar background and external context Harrison struck in his early work is hardly maintained as he tries to depict a larger Cold War scenario and underlines the fracture between collective imagination and cultural (mis)representation by using sketches and 'vignettes'. Compared to Harrison's sympathetic approach to the plight of downtrodden peoples (which emerges, for instance, in his 'post-colonial' poems), his reaction to life beyond the Iron Curtain, in post-détente Prague, sounds rather imperceptive, though like Fenton, Harrison might have resented 'Eastern' opacity. Imagination fails to spark off complex visions in his 'Curtain Sonnets', which were also originally included in *From The School of*

Eloquence. Though reprinted in his successive selections, the sequence sounds, by now, merely topical. Harrison's confrontation with place is mediated by his witty adherence to literary and cultural clichés, and handling of caricature. As he re-stages the West/East divide in 'The Curtain Catullus' (CP 53-4), Harrison sees himself as the intruder in a world which is literally and figuratively frozen, the Soviet bloc adventurer who falls prey to local beauties (in this case, a dancer) and is harassed by the secret police:

I glance round for my tail. We met head-on
in one blind alley, face to face. We grinned
And nodded and went on. I hope he's gone.
He'd shop us if he saw my bourgeois hand
slide down the zip-line of your dress and pass
the vertebrae, your Party lips
against my lips. Relax! No cause or class
can take the pleasure from between your hips (53)

The poem's liberal stance is explicit and attuned to the overall gist of the collection, and to Harrison's ideological assent to liberation struggles (in Nigeria, in Gambia, in Ecuador). But whereas the personal is certainly political, the reverse is not true and Harrison's argument sounds extremely shallow in its black-and-white confrontation between East and West, inspired by the kind of imagination moulded by John le Carré and by hard-boiled fiction. The same might be said of 'The Bedbug', where totalitarian control is tackled with a kind of ironic defiance (CP 55); whereas in 'The People's Palace' the poet celebrates freedom in the 'icy' palaces of power which the Prague spring promised to melt (CP 59). On the other hand, Harrison is keen on handling assessed cultural codes, even to the detriment of first-hand experience: Prague seems voiceless, but its 'captivity' is appropriately vehicled by the speaker's twofold reference to Mittel-European dissidence. Jan Hus, a symbol of public and political rebellion and Franz Kafka, a symbol of private, intellectual dissidence, might as well go on preaching and gazing, to no avail:

I'm not so sold
on all this Gothic and this old Baroque.
My fur hat tickles and I'm freezing cold.
I need a drink, a sit-down and a smoke.
I speak my one word of your language: thanks!
Let's kiss. You laugh and pivot on one toe

to point out Hus still preaching, Russian tanks
and Kafka's ball-less eyes caked up with snow (*CP* 53)

To conclude, Harrison's short excursion eastwards and his oblique approach to recent, burdensome history foreshadowed little of the poet's engagement with crucial sites of post-Wall Europe. It was, however, by foregrounding his keen handling of historical and cultural codes and popular/literary collective imagination and by remoulding both his intermittent narrative impulse and his dramatic vein, that Harrison was eventually able to locate historical and politic anxieties. The opening to Europe and to its landscapes or traumascapes, propelled this process. Harrison's concern with representation, inherent to both his reading of recent history and his depiction of the working class, his tendency to capture iconic detail and to make connections between private accident and more extended background, broke new ground.

Reconsidering Harrison's claim about contemporary 'duty to memory', it is possible to explore two works where Harrison's role as a messenger of history was very differently accomplished. Both 'The Mother of the Muses' and *Prometheus* venture into the haunted lands around which European imagination centred around 1989: they start from the place's semiophoric resonance²⁹⁰ to explore established themes in Harrison - the memory of war, the silence of the 'defeated' and the dynamics of Western civilization's *wrong* drift - within a perspective which originates in Harrison's more overtly 'local' preoccupations to overcome them. Attention will therefore be drawn to the shaping power of 'images' to encompass the interaction of different meanings, and above all to explore contradictions inherent in the interplay between historical consciousness and a possible, supra-historical vision.

IV.2 Anglo-German attitudes: Dresden and the 'gaze of the Gorgon'

The Second World War has been fought against the very
essence of evil. There was nothing one could *not* do to such an
enemy.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ On the notion 'semiophore', which centres on the interplay between semic or textually realised meaning and cultural meaning of a place, see Krzysztof Pomian, *Sur l'Histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 191-229.

²⁹¹ Kurt Vonnegut, jr., *Wampeters, Foma & Ganfaloons: Opinions* (St. Albans: Panther, 1976), p. 65.

Whereas the Second World War has surfaced in his poetry from the beginning, it was not until the early nineties that Harrison confronted readers with the sense of ambivalence which had afflicted him. His awareness that ‘those who saw the Gorgon have not returned to tell about it, or have returned mute’²⁹² and that history is offered to his generation’s belated historical recognition either by means of narrated stories or of increasingly fragmentary, serialised and televisual memory, first led him to meet *The Shadow of Hiroshima*: in the poem, Hiroshima turns into a distant and extreme place of memory, where wiped out living creatures have physically and materially been turned into shadows.²⁹³ From Japan, the shadow of twentieth-century horrors quickly returned to closer, but emotionally and ideologically ‘forbidden’ places in Europe in what might be regarded as Harrison’s first post-Wall work, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. The collection includes poems from *Loiners* and *From the School of Eloquence* alongside the Gulf War and the Iraq poems mentioned in the introductory chapter. With its iconoclastic and documentary urgency, the ‘anti-war’ section provides a contemporary counterpoint to sections where Harrison delves once more into the recent past.

The much-debated issue of European integration proves challenging for Harrison. From a British or indeed English perspective – which for all his internationalism Harrison is loath to relinquish – scepticism is hardly unexpected; yet Harrison’s overview blends sedimented prejudices, like anti-Germanism, with more idiosyncratic ways of holding a mirror up to Europe, as he questions the ideological basis of super-national cohesion rediscovered after 1945, and soon tested against new battlefields in Sarajevo. In the title poem, mirrors multiply in the glass and steel facades of reunited Germany, symbolising the financial-military complex of EU. At the same time, the poem traces the wanderings of Heinrich Heine’s statue across Europe and across

²⁹² Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* ([1986] London: Abacus, 1989), p.63.

²⁹³ In *The Shadow of Hiroshima (The Shadow of Hiroshima and Other Film/Poems)*, London: Faber & Faber, 1995) the speaker’s *doppelgänger* is Shadow San, a ghost-like Japanese survivor of the Second World War. Unpredicted, imaginative transfiguration relieves the bleakness of the poem, yet the de-metaphorisation of the shadow is shocking as the speaker (and the reader/viewer) detects material presences – residual matter impressed on walls by living creatures, plants, minerals – on the resurrected landscape of the Japanese town.

the century, so that 1990s Europe is confronted with its past. The power of the Gorgon features as both the destructive drive underlying the century and the petrifying reflection into the present:

From long ago the Gorgon's Gaze
stares through time into our days.
Under seas, as slow as oil
the Gorgon's snaky tresses coil.
The Gorgon under the golden tide
brings ghettos, gulags, genocide (*Gaze* 61)

The poem casts post-1989 economic and political agreements for 'ECU-land' as signals of the historical continuity with, rather than disruption from, the technocratic/ progressive and militarist attitude which brought about two World Wars and Nazism.²⁹⁴ Heine's statue, vandalised under the Nazi regime, is now seen comfortably sitting in Toulon 'on a new safe base' (73), a term which also hints at new NATO 'defence' measures. Present disasters are actually evoked, including war waged for 'oil' and for the 'golden tide' which fuels European economic planning. The law-and order-regime is 'half-enforced' in the name of security and casts aside those who fall out of society (63-4), an argument which recalls Harrison's discussion about surveillance politics in the *Oresteia*.

Nevertheless, the historical-political register of the poem fails to match Harrison's attempt to mould metahistorical meaning. There is little in today's 'Bankfurt'- led Europe to effectively bring about that past, and the evocation of myth 'tilt[s] the explanation towards the extra-social, [...] towards the Gorgon [which] is not generated from within and between societies, but arrives, like bombers, from afar.'²⁹⁵ The image of the Gorgon also defuses Harrison's explicit misgiving about the effective power of art to prevent tragedy. Heine maintains, 'Gaze and create. If art can't cope/ it's just another form of dope,/ and leaves the Gorgon in control/ of all the freedoms of the soul' (62); this 'free, subversive' poet is, nevertheless, plainly portrayed as a victim of the barbarous age which prefigured twentieth-century crimes. His voice has been silenced, while

²⁹⁴ Contrasting late twentieth-century Germany (the main site of ECU land) with visions of Kaiser Wilhelm's period, Harrison depicts post-Wall Germany in a conventional way, by foregrounding the 'Prussian' qualities of the 'German' identity.

²⁹⁵ Rylance, 'Doomsongs', p.146.

Europe, once back to civilization, has tried to recompose its fragmented culture: in the musical score Harrison provides for the televised version of the poem, baroque and romantic music – the latter evoking German nationalism – arouse the inevitable suspicion that art might ‘connive’ with the destructive outcome of civilization.

Harrison must have always been aware of the potential inefficacy of speculation. Of course, his later, short reportages on the Sarajevo and Donji Vakuf sieges²⁹⁶ show a decidedly more committed reaction to European ‘forgetfulness’. However, a counterpoint to his detached view of history occurs already in *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. At the opposite pole of Harrison’s generalising and ideologically biased outlook on Europe of ‘The Gaze of the Gorgon’ is, in fact, the long poem ‘The Mother of the Muses’ (*Gaze* 38-45) where tensions unleashed by the end of the Cold War and older ghosts interweave, making his response to the resurgent concern with the long-term consequences of the Second World War timely and thought-provoking.

Between the mid-eighties and the noughts, the so-called *Historikerstreit* catalysed some of the prominent international debates about the memory of the Second World War.²⁹⁷ The ‘historians’ dispute’ sprang from the multi-layered ‘question of memory’ that Fenton had foreshadowed early in the decade. For more than thirty years, both Germany and Western Europe had eluded questions about what memories survivors built on while forging a new nation after the war, to what extent Germans could cast themselves as victims of war and what episodes had been erased not just from European but from German historical consciousness. All these questions were not new to the ‘old generation’ of intellectuals, as the republication of Adorno’s ‘On the Question: What is German?’ made apparent. The new generation of German writers were no less aware of the problem. In 1990, Enzensberger’s essay ‘Europe in ruins’ traced reservations about ‘Europeanness’ and ‘Germanness’ back to the moral censure formulated by writers on the

²⁹⁶ See ch. I, p. 23 ff.

²⁹⁷ The historians’ dispute, or the ‘historians’ clash’, involved Great Britain only later, as the revisionist writer and Holocaust denier David Irving was trialled and found guilty in 2003. The *Historikerstreit* centred on different revisionist readings reaching back to the Second World War, and included revisionist theses concerning the Holocaust. See Judt, *Post-War*, pp. 808-20.

continent and in Great Britain in the aftermath of the Second World war.²⁹⁸ Seven years later, the Anglo-German novelist W.G. Sebald rekindled discussion by delivering a series of lectures in Zurich. The lectures, later published as *On the Natural History of Destruction*,²⁹⁹ took issue with the RAF raids on Northern Germany (up to 1989 ‘comfortably’ hidden on the other side of the Wall) and with the idea that the ‘stream of psychic energy’ from which the German drew between 1945 and the post-Wall age had ‘its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundation of [the German] state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the post-war years’.³⁰⁰ Sebald offers a diagnosis of the socio-psychic condition of (by then) unified Germany and lends Fenton’s early insights the provocative edge of the insider:

The rather unreal effect of the eyewitnesses reports also derives from the clichés to which they often resorted. The reality of total destruction, incomprehensible in its extremity, pales when described in such stereotypical phrases as ‘a prey to the flames’, ‘that fateful night’ [...]. Their function is to cover up and neutralise experiences beyond our ability to comprehend [...] People’s ability to forget what they do not want to know, to overlook what is before their eyes, was seldom put to the test better than in Germany [...] An English observer remembers an operatic performance in [Berlin] just after the cease-fire [...] Who could deny that the audiences of that time, eyes shining as they listened once more to the sound of music rising in the air all over the country, were moved by a sense of gratitude that they had been saved? Yet we may also wonder whether their breasts did not swell with perverse pride to think that no one in human history had ever played such overwhelming tunes or endured such suffering as the Germans.³⁰¹

After considering a number of literary representations of the attacks, Sebald casts both Western and Eastern Germans’ silence over Dresden, Berlin or Hamburg as a sort of wilful repression. In his view, this ‘collective amnesia’ is integral and complementary to the reading of Nazism as a catastrophic, extra-historical event – the quintessence of evil, as Kurt Vonnegut Jr. put it – which survived the revived discussion about its ‘banality’. All this, he suggests, helped Germans frame their own demise into a cathartic paradigm of destruction and rebirth – a conceptual framework

²⁹⁸ See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Europe in ruins’ [1990], in *Civil Wars: from L.A. to Bosnia* (New York: New Lines, 1993).

²⁹⁹ W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London: Hamerth Hamilton, 2003).

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25 and p. 44.

which Sebald seems ambiguously to share (partially, at least) and which is cognate with the eschatological, ‘catastrophic’ framework rejected by Milosz in *The Witness of Poetry* through an urgent appeal to historical sense: ‘I expect, perhaps quite soon, a radical turning away from the Weltanschauung marked principally by biology, and this will result from a newly acquired historical consciousness.’³⁰²

‘I’ve always been obsessed with Dresden’, Harrison admitted once the Sebald affaire landed on Great Britain.³⁰³ In fact, Harrison’s long poem ‘The Mother of the Muses’ foreshadowed Sebald’s argument and was attuned to a line of Dresden-born writers who between the late eighties and the nineties returned to the subject of Dresden, such as Michael Hoffman’s and James Fenton’s friend, the poet Durs Grünbein.³⁰⁴ Harrison faced the invisible landscape of ruins the Germans had left behind and removed wartime memories which were no more comfortable for Germany than for Great Britain. What the adult Harrison continued to stumble into was not, in fact, ‘Coventry’ and the blitz, but the demythologizing narrative of the Allied ‘moral bombing’ on Northern Germany.

‘The Mother of the Muses’ was written between 1985, the date of fortieth anniversary of the destruction of Dresden, and 1987 (the epigraph refers to the death of the poet’s father-in-law); however, Harrison worked on it for some time, and published it only after the fall of the Berlin Wall. At that time, the *Historikerstreit* had extended well beyond Germany. What is more, Great Britain was preparing for the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, no less than continental Europe. The kind of nationalism made popular by the Thatcher administrations resurfaced unabashed, and was resented by many intellectuals (historians like Eric Hobsbawm condemned ‘the spirit of Dunkirk’ and have kept underlining how ‘England was dragged into [war] by Germany itself’ ever since).³⁰⁵ This climate gave Harrison the chance to address two

³⁰² Milosz, *Witness of Poetry*, p.110.

³⁰³ Nicholas Lezard, ‘Fire in his Belly’, *Independent on Sunday*, 11 April 1999, p. 6.

³⁰⁴ See James Fenton, ‘The Burning Issue’, *Guardian online*, 29 January 2005. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>> Track: Grünbein, Dresden [17 February 2005]. A selection of Grünbein’s poems was first published in 1991. See ‘Durs Grünbein’, *MPT-Looking Eastward* (1991), pp. 64-78.

³⁰⁵ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *On the Edge of the New Century* (London: Polity, 2002), p.27. Historic sources had never obscured the psychological strategy adopted by the Allied and supported by Churchill, pivoting on the idea of ‘moral bombing’ pursued to ‘defeat the enemy’s morale’.

different historical concerns: British memorialisation of the Second World War and the taboo which still covered the Allied attacks. Background material for this poem included different sorts of items: frames from German and British documentaries of the fifties, photographs taken by the poet in restored Dresden, a number of leaflets and pages from travel books presenting Dresden as the renowned Florence-on-the Elbe. The poem is, however, set far away from the German city, in Canada, and starts with a domestic scene, as the speaker/Harrison tries to remember a passage from Aeschylus' *Prometheus*:

After I've lit the fire and looked outside
and found us snowbound and the roads all blocked,
anxious to prove my memory's not ossified
and the way into the storehouse still unlocked,
as it's easier to remember poetry,
I try to remember, but soon find it hard,
a speech from Prometheus a boy from Greece BC
scratched, to help him learn it, on a shard.
[...] now, not that much later, when I find
the verses I once knew beyond recall
I resolve to bring all yesterday to mind,
our visit to your father, each fact, all.

Seeing the Home he's in 's made me obsessed
with remembering those verses I once knew
and setting myself this little memory test
I don't think, at the moment, I'll come through.
It's the Memory, mother of the Muses, bit.
Prometheus, in words I do recall reciting
but can't quote now, and they're so apposite,
claiming he gave Mankind the gift of writing,

along with fire the Gods withheld from men
who'd lived like ants in caves deprived of light
they could well end up living in again
if we let what flesh first roasted on ignite
a Burning of the Books far more extreme
than any screeching Fuehrer could inspire,
the dark side of the proud Promethean dream
our globe enveloped in his gift of fire.

He bequeathed to baker and to bombardier,
to help benighted men develop faster,
two forms of fire, the gentle one in here,

and what the Luftwaffe unleashed, *and* the Lancaster.
 One beneficial and the one baleful form,
 the fire I lit a while since in the grate
 that's keeping me, as I sit writing, warm
 and what gutted Goethestrasse on this date,

beginning yesterday to be precise,
 and shown on film from forty years ago
 in a Home for the Aged almost glazed with ice
 and surrounded by obliterating snow.
 We had a choice of watching on TV
 Dresden destroyed, then watching its rebirth,
 or, with the world outside too blizzardful to see,
 live, the senile not long for this earth. (*Gaze* 38-9)

The poem's external frame takes on metaliterary meaning, showing the speaker intent on private acting: this makes readers recognise Harrison 'the humanist' and the scholar. The intertextual reference Harrison weaves into the poem does not, however, thoroughly establish the ideological and dialectic core of the poem, as happens in earlier poems like 'Them and [uz]' when the speaker regards himself as a 'stutterer Demosthenes', contrasting his eagerness to orate with his disabling awareness of class-ridden language hierarchies. The opposition built in the initial consideration of Promethean gifts – creative and destructive fire, leading to 'baker and bombardier' – is rather functional to the metaphoric chain which supports the poem and will be resumed later on. The fire-gazing scene thus takes on a two-fold meaning, both literal and metaphorical, as fire turns into a trope used throughout the poem.³⁰⁶ In the poem's immediate context, it also serves to usher in a kind of introspective mood which is much in tune with the connective and essentially monological framework of Harrison's long poems after *From the School of Eloquence*.³⁰⁷

From the very beginning, the poem has a strong narrative and digressive pattern, and its rhythm reproduces the elliptical working of individual memory. References to *Prometheus*, and

³⁰⁶The image links up with Harrison's favourite representation of poetic imagination, moulded on another interpretation of the Promethean myth. Harrison's suggestive rendering of imagination in 'Fire and Poetry' (pp. 270-2) echoes P.B. Shelley: 'Obscurely through my brain like shadows dim/sweep awful thoughts, rapid and thick (*Prometheus Unbound*, Scene I, Act I).

³⁰⁷ See Massimo Bacigalupo, 'Introduction' to *In Coda per Caronte* (Torino: Einaudi: 2000), pp. v-xv.

to the ‘test’ concerning Harrison’s father in law, introduce memory as the poem’s leitmotiv. This entails both a confrontation with the loss of self-recognition old age and age-related diseases such as Alzheimer bring about, and a parallel confrontation with historical memory to which Harrison’s generation has but indirect access: frames of Dresden are first introduced as a TV-documentary, which is indicative of the tension to engage with ‘hypermediated experiences of memory, [...] the memory of the witness’s memory’ which Rowland detects in Harrison’s more recent production.³⁰⁸ The kind of fragmentary witness provided by such an impersonal medium effectively counterpoints Harrison’s personal treatment of wartime memories in the early poems reprinted in *Gaze of The Gorgon*. ‘Dresden’ is deliberately detached, and the role of the messenger is ascribed later on to the ‘voices’ of its protagonists.

The speaker does not immediately conjure up any narrative context to the ‘question’ raised by mentioning Dresden. It is the visual and mythological nexus created by fire which suddenly links up to the paradoxical ‘fast development’ and outcome of *techné* symbolised by the aerial war of 1939-45, ‘the baleful form’ of Western civilised development; as suddenly, a visual shift occurs from domestic fireside to the fire ‘that gutted Goethestrasse’ in Dresden. The speaker’s attention is nevertheless diverted by the disquieting Larkinesque setting where the denizens’ memory fails, depriving them of the exact sense of ‘who they are’ but bringing them back to their mother tongue:

Piles of cracked ice tiles where ploughs try to push
 the muddled new falls onto shattered slates,
 the glittering shrapnel of grey frozen slush,
 a *blitz* debris fresh snow obliterates
 along with what was cleared the day before
 bringing even the snowploughs to a halt.
 And their lives are frozen solid and won’t thaw
 with no memory to fling its sparks of salt.

[...]

You won’t hear Gene, Eugene, Yevgeny speak
 to nurses now, or God, in any other tongue
 but his Ukrainian, nor your dad Greek,

³⁰⁸ Rowland, ‘Introduction’ to *Holocaust Poetry*, p. 10.

all's left to them of being young.
 Life comes full circle when we die.
 The circumference is finally complete,
 so we shouldn't wonder too much why
 his speech went back, a stowaway, to Crete.

Dispersal and displacement, willed or not,
 from homeland to the room the three share here,
 one Ukrainian, one Cretan, and one Scot,
 grow less Canadian as death draws near.

If we *are* what we remember, what are they
 who don't have memories as we have ours,
 who, when evening falls, have no recall of day,
 or who those people were who'd brought them flowers.
 the troubled conscience, though, 's glad to forget.
 oblivion for some 's an inner balm.
 They've found some peace of mind, not total yet,
 as only death itself brings that much calm (41-2)

The theme of memory as self-possession informs Harrison's agnostic poetry. It brings to mind earlier depictions of his parents in their last years ('Marked with D.', 'Painkillers') and so do the 'sketches' included in stanzas nine to sixteen (39-40), where the denizens' fragmentary memories emerge and Harrison plays on his typical, slightly comic groundtone. The ingenious overlapping of outer and inner space, sight and psychological states, invites comparisons with the amnesia that is going to take centre stage: the 'shrapnel' and the 'blitz debris' on TV are projected on the frozen landscape outside, wartime fire turns into 'sparks of salt'; inside the Home for the Aged, memory 'won't thaw'. The very naturalness of death so loudly invoked by the speaker's metaphysical reflection will be denied by the focus on Dresden which follows, but in the meantime, history already invades nature by slight semantic shifts. 'Obliteration' conflates two different overtones: it becomes 'like a balm' as the metaphor is intensified by its association to snow and it hints at the overall destruction of the city which is conventionally represented like a phoenix. At the same time, however, the parallel drawn earlier between the 'icestorm' and the 'firestorm', and the representation of destruction work against such a reading. Just like Fenton,

Harrison wonders at the destruction which is built in the reconstruction of Dresden, at the vacuum created by the very removal of material vacuum.

As the speaker leaves ‘Gene’ to solitary recollection, transition from the outer narrative frame to the embedded ‘Dresden section’ actually leads to the painful memories of a war survivor, while destruction is re-evoked by a zoo warden:

And those white flashes on the TV screen,
 as a child, whose dad plunged into genocide,
 remembers Dresden and describes the scene,
 are they from the firestorm then, or storm outside?
 Crouching in clown’s costume (it was *Fasching*)
 aged, 40 years ago, as I was, 9
 Eva remembers cellar ceiling crashing
 and her mother screaming shrilly: Swine! Swine! Swine!

The Tiergarten chief with level voice remembered
 a hippo disembowelled on its back,
 a mother chimp, her charges all dismembered,
 and trees bedaubed with zebra flesh and yak.
 Flamingos, flocking from burst cages, fly
 in a frenzy with their feathers all alight
 from fire on the ground to bomb-crammed sky,
 their flames fanned that much fiercer by their flight (42)

Here again, semantic consistency supports narrative shifts, but also blurs them: it highlights the opposite strains of recollection and amnesia, recovery and illness, remembrance and disremembering but also, significantly, construction and destruction. Starting from the identification of Dresden with the target of ‘baleful fire’, Harrison actually moves on to tackle the re-building of the city by playing on the cultural myth into which its downfall was re-inscribed after 1945. The continuity between the myth of Dresden as the *ElbFlorenz* and its role as a victim of Europe’s drift to self-destruction lies thus at the core of Harrison’s poem, which in many respects foreshadows Frederick Taylor’s recent analysis of the myth in *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁹ See Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 347-408.

On a superficial level, Harrison's speaker subverts the new Dresden myth by insisting on the vacuity of reconstruction: he downplays the notion of refined art and its conventional but ultimately abortive association with 'civilization' by downplaying the well-rooted vision of Dresden as the capital of European Baroque. What follows is a manneristic 'zoom' on the very symbol of Dresden's renewal, the restoration of the Baroque Semper Opera:

I was glad as on and on the speaker went
to the last flayed elephant's fire-frantic screech
that the old folk hadn't followed what was meant
by official footage or survivors' speech.

But then they missed the Semper's restoration,
Dresden's lauded effort to restore
one of the treasures of the now halved nation
exactly as it was before the War.
Billions of marks and years of labour
to reproduce the Semper and they play
what they'd played before the bombs fell, Weber,
Der Freischuetz for their reopening today.

Each bleb of blistered paint-work, every flake
of blast-flayed pigment in that dereliction
they analysed in lab flasks to remake
the colours needed for the redipiction
of Poetic Justice on her cloud surmounting
mortal suffering from opera and play,
repainted tales that seem to bear recounting
more often than the facts that mark today:

The dead Cordelia in the lap of Lear,
Lohengrin who pilots his white swan
at cascading lustres of bright chandelier ...

Next more TV, devoted to the trial
of Ernst Zundel, who denies the Jews were gassed,
and academics are supporting his denial,
restoring pride by doctoring the past,
and not just Germans but those people who
can't bear to think such things could ever be,
and by disbelieving horrors to be true
hope to put back hope in history (42-3)

The phrase ‘halved nation’ (unchanged through the poem’s revisions after 1987) is ambivalent enough to remind the readers of Dullivant’s contention that since post-war reconstruction German cities have been ‘not so much divided upon themselves as from their true, historical selves’.³¹⁰ As the emblem of Dresden’s unblistered past, the Opera helps Harrison to break from within the cultural myth of the ‘Florence on the Elb’. Word-play and cultural references are included to insert history within the ‘frames of art’: the allegory of Justice brings to mind the notion of the Allied ‘poetic justice’³¹¹; the focus on Baroque paintings, as well as the reference to Weber and to German romantic heritage, does not only entail with the regressive narrative the speaker explicitly attacks, but is also used to hint at the ideological horizon of National Socialism which distorted that heritage.

The destruction of Dresden is only apparently moved out of Harrison’s focus by the reference to its restoration and by the following shift from televised history and the pre-1989 renaissance of Dresden to TV news, and more specifically to the ‘exemplary’ trials of revisionists like Ernst Zundel. Not unlike some sections of the charade between the poet and the hooligan in *V.*, Harrison’s argument may sound here strained or too didactic, the more so since there is no dialectic thrust to complicate it. The poem reaches here a release of tension, but this section sheds light on poetic dynamics at work before it. Part of Sebald’s argument in his book is that, although literature may provide the way to ‘gaze into horror’, most writers inspired by the firestorm on Dresden, no less than eye-witnesses, in fact diverted their gaze from it by either hyperbole or ellipsis. Harrison’s strategy does not overcome this problem, since the poem does not really trust the TV documentary to gaze into tragedy. Television is not there to replace Harrison’s *doppelgängers* or Virgilian companions (the ‘shadow of Hiroshima’, the Iraqi soldier, Heine) who fulfilled the role of witnesses. What Harrison’s speaker does in the middle section of the poem is actually to ‘dub’ the televised ‘report on destruction’ by exploding the semic code which Dresden takes on as the poem progresses and the city becomes at once the place of destruction and the place where destruction was removed. Harrison draws from literature as well

³¹⁰ Dullivant, *Divided City*, p. 168.

³¹¹ The expression ‘Poetic Justice’, in reference to the RAF attacks on Northern Germany, was used by Winston Churchill. See Sebald, *Natural History of Destruction*, p.19.

as from history: his poem actually reflects two *topoi* centring on ‘Dresden’: the (half-sketched) narration of aerial bombings and the destruction of the zoological garden. Both the images stored in ‘Eva’'s memory, and the zoo scene can be found in other literary works, from Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade: a Duty-Dance with Death*³¹² to Ken Smith’s ‘Zoo Station Midnight’, where the animals’ impossible escape from the firestorm turns into the Eastern Germans’ abortive escape from memories: ‘the animals wander the trapped streets, // furiously wounded, waiting for the midnight train/ for Friedrichstrasse, from Warsaw, from Moscow’ (*The Heart, the Border* 56).

Only seemingly does Harrison counteract the temptation of amnesia rendered through the filmic compression of ‘destruction and rebirth’, which is the correlative to a process of psychic removal. Visualising the destruction might mean to truly read Dresden by re-inscribing history into it, working against the rather suspicious image of its complete rebirth. Yet the way Dresden is evoked in the poem is *per se* an exploration of how removal works and how literature may contribute to it. As the speaker ‘reports’ on the warden’s evocation of the zoo, he relies on a markedly non-realistic code which collides with the crude contents of the documentary. This kind of ‘footage’ hinge on hyperbole and almost voyeuristic approach to the event; moreover, Harrison employs a tightly-wrought pattern of alliteration and consonance which is not to be found in the rest of the poem and which ‘infects’ his speaker’s reaction to the documentary. Re-telling is thwarted by the clash of meaning and formal patterning: the act of ‘remembering’ is gruesomely re-echoed by the ‘dismembering’ of baby chimpanzees; the tension to escape suggested by the ‘*flamingos flocking from burnt cages, flying*’ is downplayed by the ‘*flames*’ surrounding them, but it informs the speaker’s mimicry of the warden’s attitude, as he laments ‘the last *flayed* elephant’s *fire-frantic* speech’. The transfiguration of flamingos into firebirds implies a degree of sublimation; it diverts, in fact, the poem’s gaze from tragedy. What this stylistic shift signals is the vaster, black scenario which is *not* represented in the poem.

³¹² Kurt Vonnegut jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade: a Duty-Dance with Death* (London: Cape, 1970).

Harrison's poem contributed to a wide-spread interest in Dresden between the eighties and the early nineties: this city features in a number of poets, from Carol Rumens to Ciaran Carson.³¹³ While Rumens represents Dresden as a symbol of helplessness ('Dark night of the year, the clinging ice/blue-marbled Dresden/smoking still'), Carson sounds closer to Harrison as he also plays on well-rooted images and stereotypes of the city. The Allied aerial attack is rendered by means of metaphoric and synecdochic dynamics, and porcelain statues (porcelain being a hallmark of pre-war *ElbFlorenz*) become the city itself as destruction turns into a big crash:

Between the rapid desultory thunderclaps, a thousand tinkling echoes –
all across the map of Dresden, store-rooms full of china shivered, teetered
and collapsed, an avalanche of porcelain, slushing and cascading: cherubs,
shepherdesses, figurines of Hope and Peace and Victory, delicate bone fragments.³¹⁴

Like Harrison's, Carson's poem betrays his uneasiness to open the 'Dresden' file. Digressive story-telling turns the aerial attack into the culmination of the main character's slow descent into hell (from RAF to IRA), but, together with stylistic transfiguration, it also blunts the impact of returning memories. Harrison's poem, instead, can be read as an effort to ultimately detach oneself from enduring 'obsession', to touch on a delicate aspect of German self-comprehension which was, or is, also an aspect of European self-comprehension.

As the poem moves to its close, it strikes a hopeful note, as private memory is seen to counteract any fear of extinction: 'in the silent dark I swore I'd made it known, / while the oil of memory feeds the wick of life/ and the flame from it's still constant and still bright/ that, come oblivion or not, I loved my wife...' (44). As is also the case with *V.*, this kind of elusion or retrenchment from the poem's more obviously politic concerns is not totally satisfying. Elusion seems, however, not completely deliberate: in fact, tensions encoded in Harrison's reading of Dresden are maybe too hurriedly resolved. This might depend on Harrison's attempt to fit discursive progression into the poem's visual development.

³¹³ See Carol Rumens, 'The Hebrew Class' in *Star Whisper* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1983), p.14; Ciaran Carson, 'Dresden' in *The Irish for No* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: TGP, 1987), pp. 3-7.

³¹⁴ Carson, 'Dresden', p.6.

The very metaphor of light as intermittent memory may suggest that flare-ups of history, though haunting and morally troublesome, cannot be internalised; what is more, although fire secures the transition from the poem's early sequences to the evocation of destruction, the 'Promethean' theme finds accommodation within Harrison's reflection on the creative power of art rather than in more uncomfortable reflections on the 'baleful', self-destructive forms of development which are suggested at the beginning. On the other hand, Harrison's own contention with art, so didactically articulated in 'The Gaze of the Gorgon,' becomes more nuanced in 'The Mother of the Muses': the evocation of destruction complicates Harrison's assumption that humankind might not bear very much reality. If 'the poem urges a turn from myth to historical fact',³¹⁵ Harrison's handling of images and tropes pulls alternatively towards historical consciousness and towards dynamics of supra-historical comprehension. Far from being resolved, this tension can be seen at work in Harrison's subsequent post-Wall work, notably in the film/poem *Prometheus*.

IV.3 '...What kind of progress is without victims': Northern England and post-Wall scenarios in *Prometheus*

In 'The Mother of the Muses', the image of fire triggers off imaginative associations which alternatively support and thwart the poem's metahistorical thrust. In Harrison's poetry, this typically signals a tension between two opposite pulls, one cumulating images which are well-rooted in contemporary historical consciousness, cultural memory and collective imagination (the fire of Dresden, the Nazi book burnings, the Allied aerial war against the enemy) and the other recombining those images through an original, if loose, discursive pattern. No less than the 'reconciliatory' pattern structural to Harrison's long poems, this brings political questions – in this case, the suffering of the defeated Germans – to the surface but also allows for the poet's ultimate withdrawal from deeper ethical assessment. Ambivalence towards historical subject matters is so explicit in Harrison's 'European vein' that it contrasts with the outspokenness and

³¹⁵ Rylance, 'Doomsongs', p.140.

uncompromising stances typical of Harrison's later engagement, as suggested in the first chapter: the topical meaning of Harrison's 'protest' poetry of the late nineties and noughts is at odds with the comprehensive scope of his European output in the mid-nineties, as Harrison's contention with 'things European' was kindled by the two-fold process of Western European victory over Eastern Europe and the re-emergence of areas which were crucial to Western, and more specifically Western European, historical recognition. Before Harrison took on the public voice of Western 'bad conscience' within a changed world order, this brought his contention with the 'Gorgon' to an unprecedented, radical effect.

After Harrison's exploit with *V.*, both his increasing commitment to the voice of history and the relative appeasement of the scholarship boy's revenge on 'eloquence' resulted into a major shift in his poetry's scope and techniques. The two processes seem intertwined, considering that the 'class vs. class' theme was soon swept away by the wider social disaggregation brought about by the Thatcher decade and that the rising need to reflect on Western political identity generally propelled less insular attitudes in the post-1989 years. Harrison's typical 'connective' dynamics no longer worked as a counterweight to tensions embodied by his language, as still happens in *V.*, and could thus carry out a more comprehensive function, dislocating and relocating the constellations of his extensive historical-political imagination; moreover, his diachronic reading of historical changes, hitherto limited to the British Isles and the 'state of the nation' theme, could invest larger historical horizons.

Both elements helped Harrison to release the radical potential inherent in the configuration of Western and European historical consciousness which had insistently but fleetingly surfaced through his early work. As shown by 'The Mother of the Muses', to gaze into the legacy of the twentieth century with detachment was by no means simple, especially when it came to the removed ambivalences lying behind the founding myth of Western post-war democratic identity. Though the poem succeeds in bringing to the fore the disabling temptation of charging historical events with suprahistorical significance, Harrison had yet to find a medium through which to release his visionary potential. More pervasively than Dresden, other places of memory broke then into his poetry; in particular, re-emergent Eastern European landscapes which Harrison

introduced to his audience by means of an interplay between what W.G. Sebald defined the ‘*kairos* of catastrophic, marked historical events [and] their presentness in the form of inherited and produced images’.³¹⁶

In order to face the numbing gaze of twentieth-century terrors through the perspective of ‘secondary witness’, Harrison turned to an old passion of his, documentary reportage and cinema. His fascination with historical images as poetic catalysts had specific reasons, which he often explains by referring to his generation’s troublesome first acquaintance with cinema – involving Second World War newsreels and post-war reportages like those mentioned in ‘The Mother of the Muses’ – and with the attendant, deeply-felt duty to participate to the very production of ‘lasting images’ which first brought him to ‘war journalism’:

As Joseph Brodsky wrote: ‘at certain periods of history, it is only poetry that is capable of dealing with reality by condensing it into something graspable, something that otherwise couldn’t be contained in the mind.’ Was the poem the fittest narration for terrifying newsreel screen images? [...] This idea developed in me and stood me in great stead when I began to make film/poems or write from a battle in Bosnia and send the poem via satellite to the *Guardian* in London.³¹⁷

Two years after the *Gaze*, while he was ‘training’ as a journalist covering the aftermath of war in Bosnia, Harrison started to work on a documentary pivoting on two parallel and apparently removed processes: the disaggregation of Northern English communities after the wholesale closure of coal pits in the Thatcher age and the emergence of labour redundancy in the ‘more integrated’ areas of Eastern Europe (a prospective, enlarged ECU land), above all Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria. In the original project, Harrison’s documentary had to be accompanied by verse, but Harrison gradually worked out a plot in order to bring together the two processes, as shown by the four notebooks which register Harrison’s preparatory work.³¹⁸ Four years later, Harrison released his most controversial and experimental work to date, the film/poem *Prometheus*.

³¹⁶ Qtd. in Amir Eschel, ‘Against the power of time: the poetics of suspension in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*’, *New German Critique* 88 (2003), 71-96, p. 91.

³¹⁷ Tony Harrison, ‘Flicks and this Fleeting Life’ in *Collected Film Poetry*, pp. vii-xxx, p. xvii-xix.

³¹⁸ Excerpts from Harrison’s four notebooks, containing photographs, frames, newspaper articles and book scraps are reprinted on the second edition of *Prometheus* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001).

Though Harrison has pioneered the use of this hybrid genre since the late eighties, *Prometheus* is Harrison's very first feature film, distinct from his previous experiments in television as well as from historical precedents such as W.H. Auden's *Nightmail*³¹⁹: as Edith Hall suggests, 'Auden composed poetry to accompany pre-existing footage, whereas for Harrison [...] the process of verse composition is inextricable from the recording and editing of the moving image'.³²⁰ A younger poet, Glyn Maxwell, approvingly regards Harrison's as an 'unmistakable documentary style in which the verse is not the adornment, but the engine [and the poet's] visions have free rein.'³²¹ Sustained by the engine of language and by Harrison's peculiar handling of myth, Harrison's historical figuration finally plays a central, not ancillary role in his vision. This emerges from the film plot, which might be thus summarised:

In order to retrieve the fire stolen by Prometheus, Hermes returns to the earth and finds himself in mid-nineties Yorkshire – a landscape dominated by reconverted industrial complexes where his henchmen, Kratos and Bia, work as supervisors at a nuclear power station. In search for Prometheus, Hermes is suddenly plunged into the mid-eighties and relives the last days of the Miners' Strike. Action concentrates on a family where Man, a miner, prepares for his last shift, quarrelling with his young Son who prepares for his classroom lesson and is learning passages from *Prometheus Bound* by heart; the Miner's wife and his father, Old Man, try to calm Man down as he goes to work, accompanied by his fellow workers and by the miners' brass band. At the pit's entrance, the miners meet Hermes in the guise of a tallyman, who revels in mocking them and reminding them of their shattered dreams. As they get out of the coal pit, some miners, including Man, are kidnapped and thrown into a lorry driven by Kratos and Bia; under Hermes' all-seeing eye, they are shipped to Eastern Germany, where they are replaced by some unidentified workers. The miners are then thrown into a furnace of molten iron and cast in a golden statue of Prometheus. In the meantime, back in Northern England, Boy gets lost in the deserted lands which used to be the site of Northern thriving industry and are now a 'coal-black Caucasus'; at home, his grandfather gives vent to his rage at the failure of the Miners' protest: they are both back to the nineties and mentally 'follow' the statue of Prometheus' as a lorry transports it around post-communist Eastern Europe: the border areas between Eastern Germany (Dresden-Berlin) and Czechoslovakia; Poland (Nowa Huta and Auschwitz), Romania and Bulgaria. Prometheus' pilgrimage is also accompanied by the miner's wife – now turned into Io – who wanders across Europe to protect the statue, and by the chorus of the Oceanides, women factory workers who appear as a counterpoint to the 'dead' miners. Watching the action from an old, 'working-class' cinema in Knottingley, Old Man becomes the very voice of

³¹⁹ Both *The Gaze of The Gorgon* and *A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan* (*Collected Film Poetry*, pp. 220-32) have a thoroughly more documentary cast, providing poetic footage to the filmed material; though also collected as 'film/poems', they are different from *Prometheus* and the filmed version of the *Shadow of Hiroshima*. As compared to the dramatic structure of the earlier film, *Prometheus* is provided with a distinguishable plot and narrative line. See Peter Symes, 'It's All Poetry to Me' in *Collected Film Poetry*, pp. xxxi- lxxvi.

³²⁰ Edith Hall, 'Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*: A View from the Left', *Arion* 10 (2002), 129-140, pp.135-6.

³²¹ Glyn Maxwell, 'Review of *Prometheus*', *Sight and Sound* 17 (1999), 55-6, p. 55.

Prometheus, whose diatribe over the fate of miners, and of the ‘renewed’ society stemming from the late twentieth century ‘freedom’ provokes Hermes. Prometheus’ act of defiance, noble as it is, seems useless as Hermes illustrates the tragic ‘drift’ of man’s technological advancement: Auschwitz, the post-industrial desert brought about by Communism, and ultimately, Io’s death, which happens ‘on air’ as she is finally caught by Kratos and Bia and sent to an abattoir. Defending man’s right to free will, Old Man attempts to kill Hermes by burning his image, but dies on the spot while Hermes defiantly resuscitates.

After ‘The Mother of the Muses’, the myth of Prometheus returns to inform Harrison’s poetry from both a figurative and, more significantly, ideological viewpoint, thus defining a ‘supra-historical’ dimension the poem gradually comes to question.³²² In Harrison’s early poem, Prometheus’ gift of fire, bestowed on mankind and ambiguously used, provides the initial spark for kaleidoscopic associations or wide-ranging ‘metaphorical chains’. In *Prometheus*, the mythological pattern is far more pervasive and ambiguous: it elicits an open, non-linear reading, complicated by Harrison’s intergeneric play which mingles realism and myth, documentary and narrative/dramatic registers. From a formal point of view, Harrison’s literary/filmic approach to myth is far from unproblematic; it is not easy to assess the political scope of climactic passages such as the following, where Old Man explains to Hermes the reasons for his, his son’s and his fellow workers’ resistance to the all-powerful engine of progress which is marginalising them. In the previous lines, his grandson quotes a passage from Aeschylus’s *Prometheus*, hinting at Prometheus’ captivity. Hermes interprets thus Prometheus’ captivity:

HERMES

It’s doomed, all that. You wasted time
 grovelling underground in grime.
 Those steaming fortresses you pray
 ‘ll last till your grandchildren’s day
 Are doomed, *doomed*, on their way out,
 Destined (as you’ say) to be *nowt*!
Nowt, nowt, nowt!

OLD MAN

They’ll outlast me.

³²² See Peter Robinson, ‘Facing Up to the Unbearable: The Mythical Method in Tony Harrison’s Film/Poems’ in *Tony Harrison’s Poetry, Drama And Film: The Classical Dimension*, ed. by Lorna Hardwick (The Open University: Milton Keynes) and at www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Colq99/colq99.htm [13 October 2008].

HERMES

Without a doubt!
 Before this screen here reads THE END
 You'll be dead, my croaking friend.

OLD MAN

Well, I'm not sorry that I'm ailing
 Seeing t' dream I worked for failing.

HERMES

History spat you out like phlegm
 Shop steward for the NUM
 Expecting of all things to create
 In class-torn Britain a fair state! (344-5)³²³

Though highly consistent with Harrison's preference for non-naturalistic drama,³²⁴ this interplay between local/socio-political context and myth sounds quite jarring: myth does not just provide a loose, external frame to the poem (as does the myth of the Wandering Jew in 'The Gaze of the Gorgon') but it thoroughly involves characterization. This is, however, less true of the figure of Prometheus than of the fascinating, metamorphic figure of Hermes. If the 'theme' of Prometheus unfolds through the appearance of typological characters, such as Man, Old Man and the Polish workers (all unquestionably 'human'), Zeus' sycophant features as an inhuman agency, a grotesque avatar of the destructive *Gorgon*:

VOICE OF HERMES

What my boss Zeus longed to do
 was melt Man down and mould a new,
 smelt the old stock and recast
 a better Mankind from the last
 [...]
 and 'better' was his way of saying
 'man with a bent for more obeying' (312-13)

³²³ References to scenes indicate the scene number which appears in Harrison's screenplay; page numbers refer to the *Collected Film Poetry* edition, unless otherwise indicated.

³²⁴ While commenting the potential adaptation of such an unorthodox play as P.B. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Harrison interestingly underlines the value of a possible meeting between classic, modern/naturalistic Western drama with non-European traditions. See 'Fire and Poetry', pp. 264-266.

While the characterisation of the god as a supernatural and supra-historical agent might turn the destiny of Old Man and his proletarian fellows into doom, Hermes' words subtly foreground their defeat against a different scenario. History, which 'has spat them out like phlegm', takes on a less disembodied meaning: progress is identified here with the destructive derive which entails not just the dissolution of Old Man and his class but the imposition of tyranny, and therefore requires acquiescence and consent on the part of regenerated mankind. What this means is clear from the various roles Hermes plays throughout the narrative, where he appears as the despised tallyman at the pit's gate (scenes 56-61), the 'boss' of Bia and Kratos in their roles as supervisors at a nuclear power station (scenes 1-9), but also, as we shall see, as the 'presiding spirit' in the scenes set in Auschwitz, where the Nazi industry of death is remembered as an act of devotion to Zeus, 'who deemed that Man was only fit/ for dumping dead in a mass pit' (sc.131-135). Hermes is by no means alone: Kratos (Strength) and Bia (Violence) also step into the narrative: the supervisors of Hermes' headquarters, they are the drivers of the lorry carrying the statue of Prometheus,³²⁵ and eventually appear both as Hermes' helpers in Auschwitz and as pursuers of the miners and of Io. Along with cinematic techniques, the characterisation of Hermes is instrumental in opposing the static quality of his monologues (or his dialogues with Prometheus) to the dynamics of the statue's and Io's journeys; but it is also crucial for Harrison to shift away from the rather abstract understanding of politics which underlay 'The Gaze of the Gorgon' by harnessing his 'diachronic vision' to a thorough investigation of recent history.

In Harrison's prologue to the film/poem, the ideological and literary story of the myth unravels to reach back to the Aeschylan prototype and move forward to 'unorthodox' contemporary Leftist readings in the 1980s and 1990s, via 'red' Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* ('Fire and Poetry' 257-263). As he argues,

it is not surprising that at times of the collapse of ideas that might have created liberty and equality the figure of the chained Titan, Prometheus, is remembered.

³²⁵ Costumes are, however, used to underline such slippages: Hermes' silver grab derives from contemporary versions of Greek drama (Hermes' traditional attribute, the caduceus, is always on stage), Kratos and Bia wear propylene vests, while the Oceanides are wrapped in diaphanous robes surmounted by head-encasing masks, and though they are real women – workers at a fish-canning factory – they move and sing on an open raft, stylised and alien.

Nor is it surprising that for those who dramatise history as dialectical struggle Prometheus has come to embody the tyrannically restrained champion of the downtrodden and oppressed. (258)

In this introduction to the documentary, the notion of tyranny seems unproblematic. Harrison has the Promethean archetype resonate through various contexts of socio-political turmoil which brought about, and in recent times thwarted, the development of modern Western democracy: from the establishment of Greek democracy, the focus shifts soon to the early modern age and the end of the *Ancien Régime*, the ideological-political challenges posed by the Enlightenment (the French revolution and the industrial revolution) and later on, the collapse of ‘monolithic ideologies’ (270), twentieth-century tyrannies like Nazism and above all, like real existing socialism. Harrison’s view is stimulating and concretely translates the creative and inclusive power of myth; yet when considering the political implications of Harrison’s actual reworking of the myth in *Prometheus*, this multilayered frame of reference becomes quite misleading.

The film’s locations as well as Harrison’s use of the statue of Prometheus as a monument to anti-tyrannical resistance might sustain a well-founded narrative of liberation associated with 1989. Yet, despite Harrison’s claim that ‘myth might give the disappointed Utopian a refuge from despair, and maybe these days the Socialist’ (‘Fire and Poetry’ 258), the film/poem touches on the end of Communism – of the European socialists’ dystopia – without providing any positive view of the political upheavals. The collapse of communist Eastern Europe, so insistently evoked in the essay as the end of tyranny and so crucial to post-Wall fictional works like Julian Barnes’ *The Porcupine* (1996), fails to enter Harrison’s drama with the impact one might expect. Despite Harrison’s preoccupation with the fate of socialism at home, the portentous panorama of 1989 revolutions evokes a distant reality, which Harrison does not appropriate: his intellectual attitude reflects that of the leftist intelligentsia for which Eastern Europe, let alone Soviet Russia, never embodied a real alternative to Western socialism. In his concern with ‘what remains’ of both dreams, Harrison stretches the historical perspective between the nineteenth century and the late twentieth century, thus lending his film/poem a

daring post-Wall edge. The titan is not free, and audiences are reminded of his captivity when the miner's son quotes the following passage from Aeschylus:

Without me Man would not now know
 the earth and all that lies below,
 underground treasures for his use
 to free him from the grip of Zeus.
 With Prometheus life began
 to flourish for benighted Man.
 My gift of fire made Mankind free
 but I stay in captivity (*Prometheus* 292)

If the 'post-Wall' dimension of the film/poem is at odds with dominant, Western European readings of 1989, the reconciliatory narrative envisaged in the Aeschylus prototype, and replicated by Harrison's insistence on the archetypal reading of Prometheus as a 'primordial figure in the history of hope' ('Fire and Poetry' 262), is undermined by Harrison's disparaging assessment of progress. Progress is identified with the presiding spirit of modernity, which Hermes also symbolises, not only prefiguring the new, technological age embodied by Kratos and Bia, but also foreshadowing the oppressive regime which might attend it and which likewise threatens the community represented by Mam, Man and Old Man. Harrison's anxiety about the Western drift 'in the bestial and brutal history' of humanity as strong as the ideologically opposed Eastern tyranny is implicit in his version of Io, whose suffering counterpoints that of Prometheus, constantly harassed by the rubber boots of Kratos and Bia:

The Yorkshire mam! She'll always hear
 The boots of Kratos and Bia.
 [...]
 Poor Kratos and his sidekick Bia
 miss the swastikas of yesteryear.
 [...]
 She'll suffer, this fire-kindling Frau
 (in the likeness of a Fresian cow)
 the sort of fate that's been assigned
 to those considered not one's kind,
 those hate's gadflies force to flee
 schizophrenic, gypsy, refugee (336)

Reflecting Harrison's idea that the use of classics should provide 'no détente' ('Fire and Poetry', 283) for the conflicting forces he brings into question, the film does not offer any structural counterpoint to Hermes' overriding power, whether one identifies it with the history that 'spat the working class out as phlegm', or (in Io's adventures) with the resurgence of fascist leanings.³²⁶ This attitude might run counter the humanistic notion of contemporary handling of myth expressed by the Polish poets like Zbigniew Herbert, in whose views poetic condensation or the stylisation of history, encountered so often in Eastern European poetry, is fruitful: 'I [employed] mythology because I thought it would have more universal appeal [...] we ought to seek general statements, messages that can be addressed to everybody',³²⁷ or Adam Czerniawski, who believes that poetry can 'crystallise facts torn out of ordinary life, the ordinary including the tragic and the grotesque.'³²⁸ Blending mythological narrative, drama and contemporary politics was undoubtedly Harrison's most outstanding attempt to match the transfiguration he had witnessed on Prague stages and which had long been articulated by Eastern European poets. Though Harrison's historical and anti-ideological stance shows similarities to the 'Eastern' humanistic afflatus, and as we shall see to Herbert's views in particular, Harrison's use of myth can hardly be said to provide any kind of hope.

Hopelessness emerges from Harrison's handling of the main narrative thread, which concerns the destiny of miners and the (partial) unmaking of the English working class. The end of the film/poem hints, in the first place, to the inevitable clash between the dream bodied forth by Man and Old Man and the logic embodied by Hermes: the two positions are irreconcilable, not only because they refer to two different political views, but because the very context of Old Man's dream no longer exists, as the half-bitter, half-humorous exchange between Man and Son makes clear:

BOY

³²⁶ In *Prometheus*, Harrison does not, in fact, hint at the titan's liberation: the story of Heracles, for example, does not affect the narrative in any sensible way. In the film, 'Heracles' is only the name of a delocated English industrial complex. The iconographic counterpoint provided by painting and sculpture throughout the film is also telling: while in Dresden, the statue of Prometheus is seen staring at a neoclassical frieze which represents 'his' liberation.

³²⁷ Zbigniew Herbert, 'Why the Classics', in *Poetry of Survival*, ed. by Weissbort, pp. 330-5, p.333.

³²⁸ Tadeusz Różewicz, 'In Conversation with Adam Czerniawski', in *Poetry of Survival*, ed. by Weissbort, pp. 349-357, p. 350.

[Prometheus] stole fire from t'gods and gave it to men down there. So now there's coal and all that. He ended up chained to a rock for thirty thousand years [...]

DAD

Serve him bloody reet for thieving. And he shouldn't have bloody bothered, if pits was his idea! (295)

Given Harrison's overwhelming focus on the downfall of the Northern working class, it would be tempting to read his film/poem as an evaluation of the Northern communities' 'anti-progressive' defence of old-style industrialism:

HERMES

bit by bit
sink Man slowly in the shit,
the slower but secure solution
poisoned by his own pollution
let such factories do their work
and swathe Mankind in acrid murk (351)

As happens with other Northern, left-wing poets like Ken Smith, Harrison's allegiance to the cause of the working class resulted into a division between ecologic and social concerns.³²⁹ Yet, as it is also the case with Smith, the ecological concern does not provide a unilateral reading key, since Harrison's political concerns shift from a local to an international dimension: his understanding of Northern, working-class 'grudge' becomes thus crucial to shed a dubious light on the post-modern and post-Wall age the film portrays.

On a formal level, he turns myth into a principle of poetic/historical figuration where possible readings multiply and intersect to release meaning by incongruity and jarring superposition, which reflect a superposition between the former two halves of Europe. If, as Rowland points out, *Prometheus* is about the 'ambivalence' of late twentieth-century historical vision,³³⁰ this ambivalence is encoded in Harrison's vision of the working class, whose destruction coincides with the very culmination of a revolution this class has economically and politically made. Crucial to the first part of the film/poem (scenes 1-94) is, in fact, Harrison's concern with the

³²⁹ See Butler, 'Culture and Debate', pp. 95-111 and Smith, 'Salvaged from the Ruins', pp. 63-70.

³³⁰ Rowland, 'Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics in *Prometheus*' in *Holocaust Poetry*, pp. 100-141, p. 104.

unredeemable impotence of the working class within a system which relentlessly condemns it not only to social death, but also to real extermination due to the environmental and physical damage. As he scorns miners and accuses them of political stupidity and backwardness, Hermes features as a savage cartoon, a caricature of unscrupulous managers who preposterously voices his version of the ‘there-is-no-alternative’ ideology. Harrison’s bent for drawing caricatures might downplay any sound political message, were it not counterbalanced by ‘surreal’ sketches which effectively translate Harrison’s political preoccupations: miners are first thrown into a lorry, like beasts, to be ‘ecologically’ reused, then turned into bullion, a sequence which Edith Hall regards as a condensation of the Marxist analysis of ‘the metamorphosis from concrete to abstract labor and thence to Symbolic Capital.’³³¹

Again, it is difficult to decode Harrison’s symbolism, in so far as the late modernity to which he refers entails the disappearance of generations of industrial workers from the socio-economic horizon; the ahistorical condensation of the basic dynamics of capitalism seems inconsistent with his specifically historical views. As Hall also points out, the film betrays Harrison’s alarmed recognition that the system embodied by Hermes is, in fact, the only remaining ‘system of order’ surviving the decline of post-Enlightenment modernity from which it stems. Harrison’s recognition of late twentieth-century capitalism has, however, often been questioned. Robinson maintains,

The film’s main structural device (besides the journey that the statue makes) is the dialogue between Hermes and the Old Man. This emphasis draws attention to the poet as storyteller because it suggests that, as such, the aim is to dramatise how a human response can be articulated in the face of oppression. Harrison seems more concerned with this aspect, the posture of ‘undiluted defiance’, as he has termed it. In this context it does not really matter who wins the confrontation: *the attitude is all*. This is where the real drama of the film, and the real politics, is to be found, in the confrontation between the Old Man and Hermes [...] It is [Hermes]’s tendency to diminish humanity that the film attempts to undermine.³³²

³³¹ Hall, ‘Harrison’s *Prometheus*’, p. 132.

³³² Robinson, ‘Facing up to the Unbearable’ (par. 15).

It might be maintained, however, that Harrison the humanist is also a ‘disillusioned anti-Thatcherite’³³³ who pragmatically confronts the post-Thatcher age, a political dimension pivoting on economic liberism rather than on thorough liberalism, where work and wages, money itself, justify social existence: the miners literally disappear in Kratos’ and Bia’s hyper-technologic headquarters, aseptic and menacingly dominated by trademarks which ‘are reminiscent of Nazi insignia’ (287).

In this kind of stage directions, Harrison might seem to retrieve his early provocative vein, where the ghost of Nazism could be revived (even gratuitously), simply by playing on images; yet the recurrence of words like ‘Fascist’ and ‘Nazi’ is linked to the film’s ideological horizon, where socio-political polarizations, ‘fascism vs. bolshevism’, are revived: in the lingo of Hermes and his fellows, workers are accordingly addressed as ‘cloth-capped sods’(318), ‘lumpenproles’ (323) or indeed ‘bolsh[ies]’ (354). Anachronism, which pervades poems such as *V.*, takes on a different meaning in Harrison’s later work.³³⁴ In fact, in the first section of the film/poem, narrative time hovers between the ‘present age’ (the late nineties) and the early and mid-eighties. Harrison’s view is actually double-lensed. The heroic miners’ strike does not just belong to the nostalgic memories entertained by Old Man and his family: as Hall points out, ‘although Harrison’s *Prometheus* is set in its own “present” of the 1990s, the strike is unambiguously signalled as the point at which Kirkby, the northern English community it portrays, was thrown into crisis.’³³⁵ This twofold perspective is further enhanced by Harrison’s focus on community cohesion, which aligns his late work to E.P. Thompson’s diachronic reading of class conflicts far more consistently than his early output or mid-eighties poems like *V.*: a recurring image in *Prometheus* is actually the Old Man’s carving of ‘STRIKING MINER, 1984 in the *Promethean pose*’ (289). At the same time, the Kirkby collieries, and the cooling towers of Knottingley which dominate the Yorkshire landscape throughout the film remind viewers of contemporary dereliction: the place where Boy wanders before stopping at the old auto salvage yard is the coal

³³³ O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, p.58.

³³⁴ Bruce Woodcock analyses anachronisms in Harrison’s language and representation of social conflict in the eighties, with specific references to *V.* in ‘Classical vandalism: Tony Harrison’s invective’, *Critical Quarterly* 32:2 (1990), 50-65.

³³⁵ Hall, ‘Tony Harrison’s *Prometheus*’, p. 133.

mining district which, once a bulwark of Labour, old-style ‘socialist’ resistance, has been turned into one of the few industrial sites in England.³³⁶ Furthermore, visions of the miners’ heroic struggle are counterbalanced by a focus on socio-economic change which foregrounds later disruptions of the traditional class balance. This means addressing, for instance, the rising role of women workers (doubled by the chorus of the Oceanides).

The co-mingling of dramatic and filmic representation also supports a distanced reading of the British socialist dream. Harrison’s early ‘Dickensian’, sketch-like rendering of working class life is brought to more effect: the poet counterweighs verbal characterisation with a kind of visual rendering which, though lurking in his early poetry, is even more rewarding once translated into filmic frames. Though rooted in Harrison’s representation of his working class environment (which includes the theme of the father-son conflict), *Miner, Boy and Mam* are silhouettes carved out of the filmic representation of the working class:

OLD MAN

Thi mam’s after thee!

BOY

That’s just too bad.
Cos I’m off. I got clouted by mi dad.

OLD MAN

What for? Ho did yer earn yer clout?

BOY

Burnt papers he were saving to cut out.

OLD MAN

What papers?

BOY

All t’ *Posts* and *Stars* wi’bits
about ‘em closing down all t’bloody pits.

OLD MAN

³³⁶ See John Kirk, *Twentieth-Century Writing and the British Working Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 103-111.

He'd not usually clout thee, would thi dad.
He's laid off after today and he feels bad. (304)

In particular, *Man, Old Man and Boy* reproduce recognisable *topoi* rooted in the representation of (male) working class as epitomised by the British filmic renaissance of the nineties; so are some sequences, like the choral sequence where the brass band which accompanies miners to the last shift before the pit closure (sc. 38), or the Old Man's *solo*, where he defends his 'right' to chain-smoking and reveals the emphysema caused by forty years spent 'grovelling underground' (sc.187). Loyal to old class values and impatient with the restrictive climate of the eighties, Old Man (interpreted by a working class icon, Walter Sparrow) is not only a mildly humorous, but also a pathetic figure, which finds correlatives in the working-class characters made popular by British television and films, from Ken Loach's *Raining Stones* to Mark Herman's *Brassed Off*, which was set in South Yorkshire.³³⁷

However, in sharp contrast to working class movies or docudrama, Harrison refrains from espousing thoroughly naturalistic modes of telling and showing: the short sketches of dialogue or monologue which punctuate the documentary and define Harrison's 'theatrical mode'³³⁸ powerfully counterbalance both the documentary and the 'realistic' mode. Harrison's 'grim' vision of working class life is overtly filtered and plays with literary echoes by turning them to political effect. If in his early poetry Harrison could 'restage' *A Tale of two Cities* in wartime Northern England (in *School of Eloquence*),³³⁹ here his attempt to describe the North as a sort of Victorian nightmare provides a convincing demystification of British socio-economic policies in the nineties, thus attacking the legacy of the ideology which backed the conservative cultural programme of the eighties. Moreover, Harrison's vision of the working class blunts any potentially soothing use of poetry and of the film's verbal engine: an emotional and empathetic

³³⁷ *Raining Stones*, dir. by Ken Loach (UK: Channel Four, 1993); *Brassed Off*, dir. by Mark Herman (UK: Channel Four/Miramax, 1996).

³³⁸ As MacKinnon argues, Harrison brings together four different intergeneric modalities – theatrical, realistic, filmic and meta-theatrical – all of which have been separately used in previous theatrical or filmic adaptations of Aeschylus' tragedy. See Kenneth MacKinnon, 'Film Adaptation and the Myth of Textual Fidelity', in *Tony Harrison's Poetry, Drama and Film: The Classical Dimension*, ed. by L. Hardwick [13 October 2008] (par.12).

³³⁹ See Rylance, 'Doomsongs', pp. 143-45.

relation to the workers' cause – supported by the driving rhythm and use of rhyming couplets – is also resisted. Not only does *Prometheus* overtly bring to the fore the elegiac mood lurking in Harrison's early poetry; it also succeeds in making Old Man's defiant attitude ultimately mock-heroic, if grotesque. His Promethean *hybris*, first in his rejoinder to Hermes' Nazi-style prohibitions, and at the end, in his attack on Hermes, is abortive:

It's just as well I'll pop mi clogs
when Socialism's gone to the dogs.
It' be a struggle to exist
in t'world and *not* be socialist.
How could I go on existing
wi' t'war still on i'out enlisting?
When men see all they knew collapse
t'old gods start to bait their traps (363)

Edith Hall has suggested that *Prometheus* marks a radical move since

it is one thing for a poet to support oppressed causes which have been legitimized by mainstream western liberal ideology, such as women and ethnic minorities [...] It is quite another to make heroes out of the white male working class, especially the National Union of Mineworkers.³⁴⁰

Harrison's representation of the working class in the film/poem certainly thrives on its radical visual impact: 'the cinema screen can give heroic stature to the most humble of faces [...], an essential requirement in a film where the most unlikely wheezing ex-miner is slowly made to represent Prometheus himself' ('Fire and Poetry' 259). Nevertheless, Harrison's epos cannot be taken at face value, counterpointed as it is by *décalage* and genuine bathos: soon after the 'last shift' scene, Hermes' monologue and Old Man's dialogue with Boy revive the 'feel of the 1980s', exposing the failure of the miners' struggle (sc. 64):

OLD MAN
I suppose it suits the bloody time
when Britain's one long pantomime,
where t' workers have been bloody conned
and someone waves a sodding wand
and down comes all the winding gear
that's stood in place a hundred year. (310)

³⁴⁰ Hall, 'Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*', p. 133.

Far from gratuitous, this balance between bathos and pathos – the tragic and the grotesque – is instrumental to the political scope *Prometheus* encompasses, as Harrison displaces his focus from the cultural and geo-political ‘schism’ in the UK to a wider European landscape, and to the post-1989 Western scenario. His return to ‘Yorkshire’ after the relative silencing of the class theme between 1985 and 1995 might sound, in fact, inconsequential, had Harrison not harnessed it to the Eastern European sections which support the second part of the film (scenes 93-176).

Interrogating the demise of the working class within the context of so-called post-industrialism leads Harrison to question the progressive framework which around the nineties was scrutinized for dynamics of exclusion (of groups, class, and individuals) rather than of exploitation within the context of rising social disaggregation.³⁴¹ A new kind of dialectic is thus envisaged. Whereas Harrison’s early work focused on the historical marginalisation of his class and on the power relations it implied, in *Prometheus* it is the ‘justified’ annihilation of the working class that haunts him and that stimulates his response to the upsetting, paradoxical outcome of so-called progress. In this context, the collapse of communism is inscribed within dynamics of global expansion which thoroughly give the lie to any Western myth of liberation concerning 1989. Hermes’ pro-capitalistic tirades point to the expansion of black market and the new age of consumerism (comically represented by cheap plastic gnomes) and to the increase of cross-Wall prostitution:

HERMES

Kratos and Bia
 like to cross the border here.
 For fifty marks they get a shag
 or blow-job from some border slag
 [...]
 Old East-Bloc men can now afford a
 quick blow-job across the border,
 When Deutschmarks fell into their laps
 at the Berlin Wall’s collapse.
 after blow-jobs they buy these
 new deities from Vietnamese,
 who buy these dwarves from Poles and sell
 to New Europe’s clientele.

³⁴¹ See Peter Beilharz, *Zygmunt Bauman: Dialectic of Modernity* (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 34-57.

Does Europe now say prayers at night
to a trouser-dropping troglodyte? (341)

The contention is substantiated by the very context of Hermes' tirade, not a financial and aseptic ECU-land but the new, post-1989 European borders where not just materials but all kinds of workers are smuggled (sc. 120). In fact, though the decline of heavy industry against which miners 'rebel' is due to dynamics of inevitable industrial amelioration, Harrison's more crucial misgivings about the possibility of any real shift to the 'post-industrial' age are ingrained into his reading of post-1989 opening to Eastern Europe.

This he consistently, and rather reductively, regards as a 'capitalisation' of Eastern Europe on the part of the West, carried out through its assimilation into late twentieth-century economic liberism and integration, which does not entail a growing visibility for Eastern Europe: the 'East' is above all cheap commodity. If politically incorrect towards those living in the former 'other side' of Europe, this evaluation is even less flattering for the old Westerners, who are also reminded of old nightmares by the re-emergence of close areas of Eastern Europe. Rather than focusing on recent Eastern European tyranny, Harrison attacks past and ambivalent versions of Western 'order', not only through local polemic, as in his recent invectives, but through historical anamnesis. Indeed, as soon as the camera first catches up with the cattle-truck driven by Kratos and Bia, past the English Channel and across the German deserted lands, a crane frame captures recognisable sites of the once Nazi-supported industrial complexes which thrived on slave labour (sc. 102-5).³⁴² The centre of new Europe is also the land of notorious firms which (once officially dismembered) supported not just German, but European reconstruction after the Second World War, such as IG-Farben, Krupp and Messerschmitts: the Other immediately takes on the familiar features of the European old ghost, which afflicts Io as she metamorphoses into a wandering pilgrim, pursued by Hermes in the form of disquieting historical memory:

HERMES
Let the poor cow have her forty inks
though we're much closer than she thinks.

³⁴² See Rowland, 'Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics in *Prometheus*', p. 123.

IO
(dreaming)

Nein.

HERMES

I'll wave my wand and make her dream
of what's deemed Europe's worst regime...

IO
(dreaming)

Nein.

HERMES

though Zeus approved of it and endorsed
the Führer's flames of ... Holocaust. (347)

From the Eastern German sequences onwards, Eastern Europe appears as the land of unredeemed *Prometheus*. Part of Harrison's contention is no doubt in tune with literary perspectives on the post-Wall age. From a purely economic perspective, this disillusioned vision of the East is peculiarly relevant to the ideological stance elsewhere endorsed by British post-Wall literature, where the notion of Western tyranny often surfaces. As Houswitschka and Hallberg maintain, post-Wall readings of Eastern Europe in the Anglosphere have typically dovetailed into two threads, the latter been consistently supported by fiction: 'the post-Wall dimension contains a qualified political understanding of freedom [...] as a rhetorical term cloaking self-interest and hollow consumerism: changes were either regarded as a fulfillment of a cosmopolitan free world or as deceitful process of choosing between two bankrupt economic systems'.³⁴³ In this respect, Harrison supports a well-established notion of post-Wall, integrated Europe as springing from the overlapping of 'two bankrupt systems'. The overt collapse of the latter hides the invisible collapse of the former, but it also hides a territorial war which abolishes any sheer division between the two former blocs: conflict is 'resolved' on a strictly economic, rather than socio-political, level. Eastern 'redemption' is defined by Eastern adherence to free market neo-liberal economic plans, uneven exchange, cheap labour passing from the suicidal

³⁴³ Houswitschka and Hallberg, *Literary Views*, p. 60.

development of five-year planning to exploitation at the hand of industrial and managerial Western directions.

But the reference to Nazism reveals disturbing readings beneath Harrison's vision of Western 'assimilation' of close Eastern Europe. Not only is the 'backward' Central-Eastern region regarded as a source for both material and human 'resources' to be shipped westwards, while capitalism is indifferent to the losses it leaves behind; the world epitomised by Bia's headquarters is a reminder of the gradual automation which, though 'progressive', might be the second face, rather than the reversal, of the nightmare represented by communism: both systems submit the interests of classes, and individuals to what is abstractly regarded as man's welfare. From the cooling towers through which Hermes' voice reverberates comes a 'briefing' which disambiguates the nature of technocratic oppression:

VOICE OF HERMES

Zeus command you don the gear
of Kratos (Force) and Violence (Bia),
and in this guise, you give some grief
to those who love the fire-thief (288)

In the West, this 'sublimated' oppression seems unbeatable, and its disastrous effects beyond recognition. By 'choosing' it, the former East seems to plunge into a more disastrous dereliction than that visible in the confrontation between post-industrial West and post-industrial East. This emerges as Harrison's 'East' also looks backwards, making it clear that the post-Wall liberation did not cancel the memory of thoroughly radical struggles for social amelioration, epitomised by the 'revolutions from below' such as that which took place at the Gdansk shipyards in 1981.

As soon as the focus is displaced from a Western to an Eastern context, the struggle of workers is reconnoted as a true struggle for liberation and 'power', crushed not only by the Polish Communist party's suppression of revolt but, more brutally, by the subsequent collapse of the socialist background which shaped it. In order to highlight ambivalences, Harrison brings about the decline of the socialist dream through a twofold, desynchronised perspective: like Northern England, Harrison's Eastern Europe undoubtedly belongs to the nineties but is also

surrealistically transfigured and plunged back into the eighties, so that the miners' heroic struggle is 'paralleled' by the Polish factory workers' revolt of the early eighties. The post-1989 nightmare and the Socialist dream revived in the early eighties are thus superimposed. In Poland, labour is bodied forth by the steelworkers, which the Old Man supports by proxy, watching their rebellion projected on screen:

OLD MAN

Raise your clenched fists to show you praise
t' founder of your foundry's blaze!

WORKERS

Prometeusz! Prometeusz! Prometeusz!
[...]

HERMES

I should have known these stubborn Poles
still had Prometheus in their souls.
[...]
Leave these Poles their smog and smoke,
and may their little children choke
and croak inside a plastic bubble
and save man-hating Zeus the trouble! (353)

Engaging with this parallel decline of 'socialism', Harrison revisits a staple of the (few) positive Western representations of late Cold War years: the Solidarity movement. Though underlining Old Man's appeal (*[he] feels the old 'solidarity'*, 353), this attempt at liberation is, nevertheless, no more idealised than the diametrically opposed movement of Western miners. The myth of Solidarity, which aimed at an improvement of socio-economic and politic conditions within a socialist framework, is also clearly removed from the post-1989 focus Harrison adopts throughout the rest of the film. It is also subject to filtered representation: the image of the steelworkers looks like a propaganda film from the fifties (sc. 141); the heroic afflatus Old Man perceives is stifled as the camera shifts to today's Eastern Europe, where workers of yesteryear are also cut off by industrial reconversion of communist states:

HERMES

Each dollar buys a missile hurled

at the champion of the human world
 by these jobless carbon-worker sods
 who take his side against us gods.
 Or did, with due devotion till
 They deified the dollar bill.
 Zeus entrusts these jobs to me,
 free-trade Hermes/Mercury! (357)

This post-Wall analysis of the fate of labour is nevertheless complicated by Harrison's wilful misreading of assessed cultural codes. Harrison's reference to Solidarity is, in fact, ambiguously contextualised. Compared to Leslie Woodhead's *Strike*,³⁴⁴ the only documentary on the Solidarity movement ever realised by a British director in the eighties, Harrison's post-1989 view sounds provoking. Significantly, Harrison even displaces the original historical frame of reference and chooses Nowa Huta, rather than Gdansk, as the first Eastern setting to appear on screen after the German-Czech borders, with its towering monument to the Heroic worker posing 'like' the Striking Miner – one of the countless monuments to the 'heroic vanguard of the proletariat' which are now treated like souvenirs of the Communist age (sc.145).³⁴⁵ Nowa Huta's steelworks, once the largest in Europe, is visually contiguous with other Eastern settings chosen by Harrison, notably Copşa Mica (Romania), to which he dedicates some reflection in his introductory essay. The 'blackest town' in post-1989 Europe ('Fire and Poetry', 271) is used to conjure up the very fall of heavy industry through a startling sequence where Romanian miners, out of job in the 'free' post-1989, bespatter the statue of Prometheus with soot (sc. 159). Rather controversially, the scene reverses one of the most effective *topoi* of post-Wall iconography which Harrison mentions in his introductory essay: Prometheus has the same fate as the statues of tyrants/dictators, overthrown by the people in Eastern Europe.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Leslie Woodhead's *Strike: the Birth of Solidarity* (UK, 1982) was, however, shot between Manchester and Liverpool, after the director went to Poland to research material.

³⁴⁵ Alison Stenning, 'Placing (post) Socialism: the making and remaking of Nowa Huta, Poland', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 7:2 (2000), 99-118, p. 102.

³⁴⁶ Edith Hall suggests similarities with Theo Angelopoulos' film *Ulysses' Gaze*, where this kind of representation achieves powerful effect ('Tony Harrison's Prometheus', p. 134).

Both Nowa Huta and Copşa Mica, cities built from scratch under communist rule and now unvisited outposts of an ‘other era’, feature in *Prometheus* as counterpoints to post-industrial Britain:

The idea of a bright future based on industrialisation and five-year plans created vast, technically out-of-date temples to Prometheus which are now, since 1989, rapidly becoming derelict rustbelts with thousands out of work. The same fate has happened to the most Promethean industries in Great Britain, steel and coal. (‘Fire and Poetry’ 272)

Significantly, however, the film still shows them as symbols of Eastern shattered, self-aggrandizing ‘dream’ of rapid industrialisation and no-limits production:

So such Promethean shrines
chemical and steelworks, mines,
still anger Zeus because they stand
for what the Promethean contraband (*Prometheus* 351-2)

Harrison captures the baroque-Stalin columns and old-fashioned interiors around the steelworks with the curiosity if not the fascination of French Surrealists who in the thirties photographed the remains of nineteenth-century industrial architecture, contrasting nature and technology.³⁴⁷ Cinematic technique allows Harrison to juxtapose the past and the present through disruptive anachronism: on the one hand, coal-black Eastern Europe is firmly rooted in a conventional representation of the East, its economic and ecologic despoliation brought about by its very distortion of ‘progress’, by its grotesque ‘myth of production’. On the other hand, this vision is distorted when in Nowa Huta long takes capture immobile industrial neighbourhoods with ‘hammer and sickle’ insignia still dominating the facade of factories, or in Copşa Mica, chimneys are still working (sc. 136-144). Further intertexts reveal that Harrison’s is the East now waiting to be reconverted by the West while it also retrieves its past self, the very dream of Soviet-style efficiency: Harrison’s panning technique, as much as the very locations he chooses, are indeed an indirect tribute to Andrzej Wajda’s *Man of Marble*,³⁴⁸ where the Polish director attacks the forward march of communism.

³⁴⁷ Stimulating examples of this kind of Surrealist aesthetics could be found in the pages of *Minotaure*, the review edited by André Breton and Pierre Mabille between 1933 and 1939.

³⁴⁸ Andrzej Wajda, *Człowiek z marmuru* [*Man of Marble*] (Poland, 1977).

If this surreal distortion defuses any strict East/West opposition in terms of ‘economic’ outcome, Harrison’s more radical move is to suggest a less obvious connection between the system which oppressed Eastern European civil societies for thirty years and the catastrophe which signalled Europe’s ‘worst regime’, a plunge into barbarity comfortably removed by what Harrison regards as the ‘affirmative’ spirit of the late twentieth century. This happens as Harrison associates, rather than contrasts, the two poles of his rediscovered, ‘ghastly East’: Nowa Huta and Auschwitz, daringly juxtaposed when the camera shifts from Auschwitz crematoria to a factory chimney in Nowa Huta (sc. 136).

In Harrison’s representation, these two locations define the axis of Central-Eastern Europe’s twofold role, as the ‘other’ side of Western modernity and as the land of Europe’s recent yet removed memory. Editing modalities help here visual association: rather significantly, Auschwitz and Nowa Huta are presented in similar sequences – still frames alternating to crane frames, use of b/w film, and little or almost no ‘plot’ – which form an imaginative cluster where ‘poetic condensation’ is most effective. A cluster of images is resumed and ‘amplified’ in this section, which testifies to Harrison’s all-pervading dynamics of connection: the fire and the smoke seen in Nowa Huta visually link up to the smoke of *Yohrzeit* (remembrance) candles seen in Auschwitz crematoria and trampled by Hermes, Kratos and Bia (scene 135); at the same time, metaphorical and visual chains ‘conflate’ the smoke associated to the crematoria and the smoke of factories that have blackened England over the last two centuries. In Hermes’ view, this association is sarcastically dismissed, but his words crucially bring about and question the possibility that the insisted memorialisation of tragedies such as the Holocaust might help moving ahead. Grappling for a ‘principle of hope’ might actually lead to a relative detachment from history. Almost the same words are used in ‘The Mother of the Muses’ to refer to negationism:

HERMES

Why? Why is it fire that they choose?
 These candles that can help them cope
 with history and lack of hope
 are anathema to Führer Zeus
 who hates fire’s sacramental use (349)

The scene set in Auschwitz has often met with detraction, mostly because of its visual and chronological connection with the scenes where Io is finally caught by her pursuers and sent to the slaughter after dragging herself across Romanian and Bulgarian cityscapes (sc. 172-5). Counterweighing the silent Dickensian intermezzos in ‘picturesque’ Bulgaria, where a woman takes pity on Io and feeds her bread and milk (sc. 166-168), this scene opens to sheer, obscene violence. Stage directions explicitly invite comparisons between this location and Auschwitz: ‘*More cattle move towards the stunning chamber [...] The colours of rust and metal and brick are close to those of Auschwitz*’. (p. 366). It looks terrifying on screen (where it is much less surreal than the miners’ death), despite Hermes’ cynical comment:

The caduceus of Hermes stirs the ashes of cremated cows and discovers the ring of Io.

HERMES

Kaputted in the abattoir,
The cow’s cremated in *pozhar*.
Pozhar, the fire that in a flash
Turns fine fir forests into ash (367)

Critiques have been levelled against Harrison’s ‘free-reining’ visions and ‘too inclusive’ use of myth:

[Harrison’s use of] collated iconography does not necessarily translate into cogent metaphor [...]. Metaphorical chains entice the viewer into following Harrison’s remarkable connections, but sometimes it is unclear when the comparisons are being encouraged, or suspended.³⁴⁹

This kind of criticism is relevant to Harrison’s possibly disturbing response to the non-comparability of the crimes associated to the Nazi regime. Doubts over the moral legitimacy of paralleling the serial killing of animals and the Nazi mass-killing are comprehensible, though Harrison’s concern with the abuse of scientific research and chemicals should be stressed: before

³⁴⁹ Rowland, ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics’, p.128.

being murdered, Io is abused by Kratos and Bia, whose chemical masks and attire remind the audience that their jobs might also have to do with the kind of abuses ‘legally’ perpetrated by the Nazis.³⁵⁰ The inclusion of Auschwitz as the ultimate episode within the paradigm of civilisation’s self-destruction is further supported by conventional representations of the Holocaust: as Dora Apel remarks, ‘worm’s-eye and bird’s-eye views of train tracks, entrance gates with the sign *Arbeit Macht Frei*, guard towers, barracks are typical icons’ which, combined with silent, slow crane shots, possibly turn photographic and filmic documentary shots into ‘timeless windows into history.’³⁵¹ Besides, the figure of the Jewish Pilgrim, whose allegorical value re-establishes the groundtone of the film’s beginning, also determines a sort of suspension from the narrative.

Harrison may be charged with indelicately equating the so-called ‘industrial genocide’,³⁵² the gratuitous violence inflicted on Io, and Nazi crimes, or with embracing a conventional depiction of Auschwitz; it is nevertheless worth considering to what extent Harrison’s analogical, associative poetic mode, enhanced by the filmic medium, may support such transitivity. Rowland suggests that, by a careful use of editing and textual associations and his ability to call up clusters of poetic images, Harrison might be aiming at subversive iconoclast poetics as well. He mentions specific strategies of juxtaposition, alternation between continuity and jump cuts, and bathetic effects which counteract the readings offered by Hermes’ voice-over, for instance as he comments on the fate of miners or, indeed, of the Holocaust victims, ‘encouraging relativism by proposing that all atrocities can be subsumed under the mantle of Zeus’s violation of human rights.’³⁵³

It might be added that Harrison’s view does not stop before Auschwitz and its desecrated memorials, before ‘the ruins’ of sheer barbarity, but progresses further into relocating Auschwitz

³⁵⁰ See Keith Miller’s review of *Prometheus* in *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 1999, p. 9.

³⁵¹ Dora Apel, *Memory Effect: the Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 112.

³⁵² Harrison himself refers to Nick Danziger’s controversial book *Danziger’s Britain*, a reportage about the damages of industrialisation on human beings, living creatures and the environment. As underlined by Harrison, the underlying idea was to document what has been called the ‘industrial genocide’ started two centuries ago (‘Fire and Poetry’, p. 272). See also Rowland, ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics’, pp. 123-125.

³⁵³ Rowland, ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics’, p. 111.

within the history of European civilization. In fact, Harrison's 'catastrophic' paradigm conflates not only 'Auschwitz' and the scene at the slaughterhouse, but Auschwitz-Birkenau and the various settings of post-industrial Europe, making desynchronization and the interplay between cultural and textual codes of reading functional to his 'vision'. Viewers, in fact, see Auschwitz both as a site of memory and as a terrifying 'industrial' site. As a post-Holocaust poet, Harrison includes but distrusts the conventional handling of 'traumascapes' of which Auschwitz is a unique example. His is a filtered response to the stratified meaning this place has taken on over the decades, which implies both its present role as a monument to memory (or a museum dedicated to the various ethnic and social groups persecuted by the Nazi regime) and its past role as an industrial site, and as a suburb of war-torn Krakow.

In this respect, it is difficult to charge Harrison with denying the historical specificity of the Holocaust in order to cast Auschwitz 'inside the most awesome and sinister, yet still theoretically assimilable category of genocide'.³⁵⁴ In the first place, it is not only barbarous slaughter but dehumanisation which links Auschwitz to Io's murder. Introduced into the abattoir, Io is 'transfigured' into a cow:

*She flings herself against the slats of the truck. She howls [...]
Io is stunned and falls from the chamber onto the metal grid.
Her head bangs across the bars of the metal grid as she is dragged by the chain
and is hoisted up into the air (366)*

Harrison's reading of 'Io' as related to systematic crimes which took place in Auschwitz is relevant to the other idea the film/poem bodies forth – that the dehumanisation, or objectification, of human beings has been required by 'modern', administrative handling of development and progress, where the destruction of people has been made possible and 'preventively taken into account', across generations. In the second place, 'Auschwitz' does not enter the narrative *ex abrupto*. Nazism, already condemned because of its thriving industry, is hinted at by mentioning its ultimate defeat at the hand of the Allied and of their experimental

³⁵⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Sociology after the Holocaust' *British Journal of Sociology* 39:4 (1988), 469-497, p. 470.

firebombing: a chorus of German ghosts, rousing as ‘drones’ (337) fills the Dresden stadium, a horrible literalisation and visual transposition of the ghosts evoked by Vonnegut:³⁵⁵

BOY 1
*Kreuzschule, wo ich studierte,
Zerstört...*

CHORUS OF GHOSTS
*Kirchen und Kapellen,
Fünfundzwanzig zerstört.
Sehenswürdigkeiten,
Siebzehn zerstört (338-40)*

The assumed barbarity of Nazi crimes is made more apparent and concrete within the context of returning hidden ghosts: more explicitly than in ‘The Mother’, Dresden defines in *Prometheus* a counternarrative to the comprehension of Nazism as an extra-historical event, reminding the audience of the ‘moral contest’ with which all Europe engaged between 1940 and 1945.

In the third place, Harrison does not depict Auschwitz uniquely as a place of ‘memory’, or rather he makes memories more problematic by associating the ghastly rendering of Nowa Huta with the equally ghastly vision of the complex of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Rowland and Hall have drawn attention to the ‘indirect’ and subtle subversion of the topical representation of Auschwitz, realised by the disorienting effect of the spliced footage of the interior and exterior of Birkenau, which interrupts the crane sequence in Auschwitz by conflating the crematoria, the barracks inside Birkenau and the sequence portraying the peripheral walls of Birkenau.³⁵⁶ Read through the mythic frame which informs the poem, these scenes might be said to include Auschwitz in a catastrophic vision articulated by Old Man: ‘we’ve got t’ knowledge, we’ve got t’ fire,/ we’ve raised ussens up ou of t’ mire/ but men thesens bring back t’ barbed wire’ (371).³⁵⁷ Yet Harrison is originally sensitive to the hybrid status Aleida Assman ascribes to this unique ‘site of

³⁵⁵ Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five*, pp.150-1.

³⁵⁶ See also F.R. Ankersmith, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 45-57.

³⁵⁷ Harrison discarded a shot which appears in his notebooks, showing the rubble of Birkenau crematoria, and therefore fuelling an historical reading by reminding his audience of the Nazi’s attempt to ‘blot out’ their destruction, to leave no trace of the machinery which technically supported the ‘final solution’. See Rowland, ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics’, pp. 120-121.

memory'³⁵⁸, by refusing to regard it as a monument. Seen mostly in silhouette, like the Polish and Romanian steelworks, the filming of Birkenau thus eludes conventional representations of Auschwitz, and works instead as a reminder of the industrial side of the Nazi project, the 'progressive' project which underlay the Third Reich's expansion eastwards, and which pre-existed the 'atrocious' drift which turned Nazism into 'Europe's worst regime'. Close to the administrative headquarters of the camp, industrial Birkenau is made to visually body forth the 'implementation and articulation of instrumental rationality' which found its accomplishment rather than its deviation in Auschwitz. Harrison's 'exploration of the inextricability of the industrialisation and the Holocaust', which has invited comparisons with the work of the Polish-English sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, is inherent in this section of *Prometheus*, which helps regarding the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust not as an event 'out of time' but 'as a legitimate outcome of modern, rational culture',³⁵⁹ according to the reading offered by Bauman on the tracks of the Frankfurt School.

The crucial role played by places and above all, by Harrison's integration of verbal with visual language is here most visible, and contributes to Harrison's subversive vision of Eastern Europe on the edge of the twenty-first century. Starting from Harrison's interpretation of the Promethean myth in the aftermath of 1989, *Prometheus* conveys his deep-rooted anxieties about progress by using myth to gaze into terrors familiar to his audiences and especially to his contemporaries. The mythological frame is instrumental not so much to dwelling on ambivalences, but to aligning them along a perspective which intertwines his local and international concern, his focus on history and historical anamnesis in an unprecedented way. Though theoretically framed within his discussion on the 'Muses', Harrison's understanding of the different terrors long hidden behind the Iron Curtain refrains from catastrophic paradigms; it rather sustains the opinion, so clearly voiced before 1989 by Eastern intellectuals like Miłosz, that communist and post-war Eastern Europe, 'Nowa Huta' and 'Auschwitz' body forth a parable of possible deviations from liberal-democratic principles:

³⁵⁸ See Assman, *Gedächtnisformen*, pp. 235- 258.

³⁵⁹ Bauman, 'Sociology after the Holocaust', p. 470.

the inhabitants of the countries with democratic systems have, in their majority, been affected by a lack of faith in the validity of democracy, and in the possibility of defending it against the encroachment of an aggressive totalitarian system. [In Europe] that disease and others seem to be related functionally to the West's extraordinary creative capability, *as if* disintegration were a necessary condition to its progress.³⁶⁰

Systematic doubt about the Age of Progress echoes more insistently in younger poets like Harrison rather than in older poets who, more directly confronted with mid-century history, could not fail to regard it as the expression of catastrophes – the predominance of man's amoral drifts. This happens in the other Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes, whose humanism stems from his recognition of the violence of history: 'we tend to dissociate ourselves from it, and suppress any sense of our own implication in it.'³⁶¹ As shown by 'The Mother', Harrison does not feel so distant from analogous 'escapes from history'. In Harrison's post-Wall work, however, misgivings about the overwhelming 'violence' and irrationality of man's history are replaced by a rising scepticism towards 'anthropometry', that form of civilised progress and rationality which submits individuals and societies to 'higher necessity' and which was denounced by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. In 'Damastes (also known as Procrustes) speaks', transcendence of the human and of the historical, while implied in Herbert's poetic method, is politically rejected:

Experts on mythology are mistaken who call me a bandit
in reality I was a scholar and a social reformer
my real passion was anthropometry
I constructed a bed with the measurements of a perfect man
[...]
the patients died but the more there were who perished
the more I was certain my research was right
since what kind of progress is without victims³⁶²

Similarities between Harrison's and Herbert's classic approach have been detected by Rowland, who compares Harrison's late-twentieth century engagement with mid-century history to that of post-war writers: like them, Harrison would 'stubbornly preserve humanist beliefs in his art,

³⁶⁰ Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, pp. 105-6. My italics.

³⁶¹ Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 257.

³⁶² Zbigniew Herbert, 'Damastes (also known as Procrustes) speaks', in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 158-9.

despite any dangers of relativism that might arise in the deployment of classical references'.³⁶³ However, these similarities disappear once we move from Harrison's theoretical views on 'poetry and history' to the actual presence of history in *Prometheus*. Herbert and Harrison meet on an ideological rather than formal level: the antiphrastic and comprehensive use of myth in the Polish poet has no parallel in Harrison's, but Herbert's humanism also counteracts the glib arrogance of a technocratic age 'characterised by its identification of the progress of mankind with the progress of science and by its exclusion from history'.³⁶⁴ From this viewpoint, Harrison's distance from 'manicheistic' readings opposing East and Western Europe, as much as his insistence on Nazism, makes him closer to the post-war 'voice' of Eastern Europe than any of his contemporaries.

Whereas part of the impact of Eastern European poets stemmed from their extraordinary foresight, Harrison's concern with the fate of Western and above all European civilisation clearly depends on perspectives which were crucially shaped by the post-Wall age. His Eastern Europe is well-rooted in representations of its present but above all of its past, on which he carefully plays. Harrison's need to visually upset his audiences and his mythical method reveal a poet anxious, in the first place, to have historical memory resonate through the present: *Prometheus* should be read in terms of his quest for a public poetry'.³⁶⁵ This attempt to mediate between poetry and filmic language and to create a 'documentary situation' ('Fire and Poetry' 277) is the more challenging as it involves crucial images of his generations' political and historical consciousness:

The appeal to futurity is not simply that 'time heals' because it brings forgetfulness and oblivion, but because creative memory is at work, giving the suffering new form, a form to allow the suffering to be shared and made bearable across great gaps of time. (Fire and Poetry 258)

³⁶³ Rowland, 'Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Classics', p. 108.

³⁶⁴ Zbigniew Herbert, 'Why the Classics', p.334.

³⁶⁵ Robinson, 'Facing Up to the Unbearable,' [par. 10].

V GEORGE SZIRTES AND KEN SMITH

V.1 History and Central-Eastern Europe in George Szirtes and Ken Smith

With Tony Harrison, Eastern Europe stepped into British poetry as part of the historical imagination his writing both endorses and questions. The ‘Other’ is encoded within a pattern of intertextual references, and it is subordinate to the poet’s pre-emptive vision, aimed at destabilising the post-1989 confidence in the surviving ‘Western’ system of order and the progressive narrative which sustained it. In keeping with his vision of poetry as ‘messenger’, Harrison engaged critically with a cluster of symbolic representations of Eastern Europe, seen both as the repository of ‘traumascapes’ and as the background of a ‘flawed alternative’ to Western Europe’s march forward.

Travelling across Eastern Europe between the mid-eighties and late nineties, George Szirtes and Ken Smith were keen on tracking the ‘region of historical consciousness’ which emerged in the late Cold War years and on remapping it, thus providing the most sustained attempt to let Eastern Europe speak for itself, or rather enter a dialogue with it. They responded to its role as a catalyst for memories, and engaged with the European ‘landscape of ruins’ from a late twentieth-century perspective:

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.³⁶⁶

Szirtes’ contention in his 1989 essay ‘Learning from Brezhnev’ is informed by the echoes of mid-eighties debates as well as by the cultural afterimage of Eastern Europe fuelled by the translation of writers from behind the curtain; yet it also poignantly shows the poet’s urgent appeal to renegotiate the opposition between East and West on the edge of a new age.

³⁶⁶ George Szirtes, ‘Learning from Brezhnev’ *Poetry Review* 81:3 (1989), 20-22, p.22.

Szirtes' claim links with Harrison's concern with the dread of a possible 'extinction of memory' the Cold War years injected in their generation; at the same time, it shows the younger poet's willingness to depart from Harrison's poetic handling of 'history' as 'unexperienced information. Alongside Smith, Szirtes is actually the poet who has most consistently tried to both retrieve and 'make' history: both rejected a thoroughly post-memorial perspective, and grafted instead Eastern Europe onto their first-hand experience of it. This meant going through the momentous change which took place in 1989, but also facing the aftermath of 'revolutions', when the wind of change turned into a less troublesome breeze. This moment was well captured by Szirtes' in 'Drawing the curtain' (*Bridge Passages* 3-4), where 'history' packs her bags and pays the bill/ long owing, and the intimate events, the lives of chairs and beds, are drowned (3). Szirtes' deliberate bathos indicates his willingness to move 'towards what remains after catastrophic loss',³⁶⁷ or rather towards the losses experienced by Eastern European people whose trained, defensive suspicion towards intimate events holds them back from re-appropriating their lives. The poet's role entails thus the ironical investigation of the 'the lives of chairs and beds'.

Szirtes and Smith were equally keen on investigating 'the intimate events' which threatened to be swept away in the portentous changes of the transition towards the post-Wall age. Their lives – spent travelling and collecting 'stories', integrating poetry with a number of materials, interviews, and photographs – are those of the *bricoleurs*, a role broached in Smith's essays and often attributed to Szirtes.³⁶⁸ At the same time, their mutual engagement with the transition to the post-Wall age made them responsive to questions raised by the 'fissured' Central-Eastern European region as it returned back to Europe after an age of tyranny. What Miroslav Holub called 'the dimension of the present moment' was particularly demanding for Europe: it entailed excavating through interleaving layers of history while memory was abruptly thawing out, and, on the former Eastern side, it required that a 'dimension of social solidarity, the great presence

³⁶⁷ Stan Smith, 'Salvaged from the Ruins', p. 65.

³⁶⁸ 'I've been called a *bricoleur*, someone forever reassembling the broken bits of the world into new shapes. I thought the word, in Levi-Strauss's term, meant beach-comber, but when I looked it up I found it defined as do-it-yourselfer [...] I'm easy with both definitions. (Smith, *You Again*, p. 93).

and simultaneity of people'³⁶⁹ be preserved, in a 'synchronicity' which defied the overwhelming sense of historical confusion.

As we shall see, to address Eastern Europe as a 'plurality of voices' was crucial to Szirtes and Smith. Both found it difficult to disburden the representation of Eastern Europe from ideologically biased perceptions shaped by pre-1989 political and cultural, literary/poetic responses. Moreover, a diametrically opposed difficulty lay in preserving 'Eastern Europe': even at the time Szirtes wrote, the very geo-political notion of Eastern Europe risked to disappear, or rather be radically rearticulated. The whole region was in fact to disaggregate under the pressure of internal upheavals, and European integration encouraged the process – excluding from assimilation former Yugoslavia and a host of marginal regions such as Transylvania (or the Hungarian section of Transylvania) and the new borders between Europe and Russia.

Szirtes and Smith wanted the voice(s) of history to become audible. In the first place, this meant intercepting a specific mood of post-Wall Eastern European literature, when 'a sense of confusion set in and imagination [was] no longer a slave of silence and communism,' but responding to the urgent changes, 'for quite a while journalism took the place of literature in ex-communist letters'.³⁷⁰ Like the debates of the mid-eighties, this new phenomenon had a peculiar impact on the British republic of letters, too. The increasing presence of intellectuals like Milosz, Holub, or Enzensberger, not only in the pages of *Granta* but also in *Poetry Review* (where both Smith and Szirtes were regular contributors) in the early nineties, is the background against which the new European dimension sought by these British poets can be read.

Szirtes and Smith took part in activities promoted by the British press and radio to connect the Isles more thoroughly with the 'other side' of Europe: Szirtes started to work for the British Council already in 1984, when he first re-visited Hungary, and some sequences from his post-1989 collections were published in *The Hungarian Quarterly*; Smith, who like Harrison was well versed in the documentary genre, worked for the *Independent* and the BBC, editing *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* when the Yugoslavian conflict was raging and publishing a collection of his

³⁶⁹ Miroslav Holub, *The Dimension of the Present Moment* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p.3.

³⁷⁰ Vianu, *Desperado Age*, p. 43.

BBC-commissioned ‘Eastern European’ poems in 2001, with the support of the Hungarian publishing house Ister.³⁷¹

In both cases, journalistic concerns were carefully weighed against the need to provide a poetic response to the re-emergence of Eastern Europe. Crucial to these poets’ commitment is the ethical imperative of witnessing and documenting, coupling the sense of a renewed Europeanness with the recognition of the ‘East’ as Other. At the core of both Szirtes’ and Smith’s ‘Eastern season’ lies indeed a different response to the opacity denounced by Fenton and the moral urge underlying Harrison’s work. By remapping the haunted lands of Europe during their journeys, these poets provided a strong counterpoint to Harrison’s hypermediated representation and definitely broke the ‘curtain’ Fenton rightly felt palpable in the early eighties. This movement towards Europe was certainly stimulated by 1989: both spent that crucial year abroad, Smith in Berlin, where he was collecting material for his eponymous prose reportage, and Szirtes in Budapest, on his third British Council travelling fellowship.³⁷² Smith published his collection *The Heart, the Border* soon after 1989, tightening the intertextual web which links poetic and prose documentary, at least as far as the section of German poems, like ‘Passing Through’, is concerned.³⁷³ Smith’s detached approach to the *Wende*, which is detected in the opening chapter, informs the groundtone of his reportage. In his prose sketches, distrust of post-1989 effective changes is actually grounded in the already apparent disillusionment the East experienced after the ‘revolutions’, in the widespread understanding of integration as ‘economic’ integration, and in the bathetic dismantling of Cold War manicheisms. Thwarted expectations downplay Smith’s otherwise enthusiastic response to the rapid remapping of Central Europe:

³⁷¹ Bio-biographical information on Szirtes and Smith can be found respectively in John Sears, *Reading George Szirtes* (Newcastle on Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2008), pp. 9-35 and 226-35, and Roger Garfitt, ‘Ken Smith: *The Poet Reclining*’ and Jon Glover, ‘Ken Smith: *Terra to Shed*’, in Smith, *You Again*, pp. 39-48 and pp. 49-51.

³⁷² See Smith, *You Again*, pp. 88-89 and Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, pp. 86.

³⁷³ See p. 8. Smith’s reportage intertwines the reporter’s sketches (‘City of the Bear’, ‘Writing on the Wall’, ‘ZukunftMusik’) with interviews realised early in 1989 and after the Wall came down (‘So many I had not thought’, ‘Peter: work on what has been spoiled’, ‘Joachim: Lucky Man’). The early sections of the reportage and a series of interviews find echo in the central section of *The Heart, the Border*: such is the case with Smith’s notes on the opening of the Wall in ‘History on Fast Forward’ (pp. 75-97), to which poems like ‘Passing Through’ or ‘The Wall: Obligatory’ (*The Heart, the Border*, 58) reach back both conceptually and lexically.

the opening of the Wall [was] a watershed, a moment before which and after which human time can be measured [...] trade, custom, culture, ancient trackways of connection re-emerge across the borders, populations are on the move West: East Germans to West Germany, Poles to both Germanies, Russians to Poland, Romanians to wherever they can get to [*Berlin* 6]
 A great slice of history is over. Even so, in the East it's still cold, windier, greyer just as ever [...] The old cold is replaced by the new cold of the social market. The border's open, but it's still grim here. The fact is [...] what they were afraid of was their own world, but they were taught to be afraid of ours. And they were right about that. [305]

Some post-Wall poems about Berlin in *The Heart, the Border* should be read in tandem with his reportage: in both, Smith shows Germany as emblematic of a wider condition of historical confusion, which he tries to experience from within by giving up the detached Westerner's viewpoint: [this]'s my record of what I saw, read, overheard, heard on the street, mistranslated, found in my wanderings' (*Berlin*, 7). This attitude lends Smith's prose a sense of provisionality which is, however, carefully handled in the poems.

If in *The Heart, The Border* documenting 'history on fast forward' partly relies on 'the prevalence of sharp short images that are kinetic' (*You Again*, 99), narrative urgency is blunted by more meditative poems which cast a slant perspective on history itself. Brooding over the condition of 'the heart of Europe', the poet (or rather his disindividualised *persona*) writes, as the title of one poem goes, 'after Brecht'. He actually merges his response to the hectic atmosphere of 1989-90 with a Brechtian concern with 'history' seen from below or, as Stan Smith maintains, 'a history of that everyday life which somewhere somehow survives the great catastrophes':³⁷⁴

In the end it is Joachim with his maps,
 Thora in her garden: roses, lilies,
 the scents she desires so she grows them.

It is the sunlight, high
 through the tall evergreens, the birdsong,
 the afternoon wind in this place, and our voices.

Telling our tales. We grew upon the other side
 of a long long war we all lost [...]. (62)

³⁷⁴ Stan Smith, 'Salvaged from the Ruins', p. 85.

In *Berlin*, 'Joachim' is 'an old man with his maps [who] after poring over old maps of the city, points out the roads that are changed [...]' and, deciding that everything 'will work again, [he] folds his maps' (*Berlin* 166). Joachim's maps are the reporter's *trouvés*, the curious belongings of an old man into whom Smith stumbles; but they also become symbols of prospective rebirth and of a kind of unity which defies disintegration ('Years have gone by. All our lives have'). The poem's rarefied atmosphere actually lends a reassuring, regenerative edge to what in the reportage is restless and disorientating. The attempt to make sense of 'fragments' springs from the urgency to return history to its protagonists, and therefore to fight its possible 'extinction': the question 'is there time/ to write a book of deeds before it's out of date', therefore haunts the reporter in 'Passing Through' (*The Heart, the Border* 60).

Szirtes' first post-Wall collection *Bridge Passages* likewise tilts a balance between the chronicler's involved attitude and the poet's detached perspective on what he sees. Nevertheless, the dialogue between his early post-Wall poems and his prose pieces (mostly essays published on *Poetry Society* between the late 1989 and the early 1990) is looser than in Smith's case.³⁷⁵ For the Anglo-Hungarian writer, prose 'reportage' was surely a way to encourage familiarity with the situation in Hungary. As Enzensberger underlines in the pages of *Granta*, the Hungarian revolution was, together with the moral dilemmas posed by Jaruzelski's Poland, in many respects central to the whole age of reconstruction formally inaugurated by Gorbachev: 'without the Hungarian precedent, it is hard to see how the dissolution of the Eastern bloc would have begun'.³⁷⁶ Szirtes was well aware of the crucial role played by his native country in the eighties; however, his essays typically emphasise his sense of disconnection and painful exclusion from the events he happened to witness between March and November 1989: 'I felt [...] that I had no right to be in the crowd; their fate, whatever it was to be, would not be mine.'³⁷⁷

1989 polarised Szirtes' literary activity. While both his essays and his increasing activity as a translator testified to his commitment to Hungary, a nuclear tension between detachment and involvement permeated his poetic output: Szirtes' *persona* repeatedly belies the pseudo-

³⁷⁵ See Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, pp. 85-108.

³⁷⁶ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, untitled essay, *Granta 30: New Europe!* (1990), pp. 136-47, p. 137.

³⁷⁷ Szirtes, 'Fables of Home', p. 12.

objectivity of the eye-witness, replying to Miłosz' antiphrastic response to the wooden language of ideology and History: 'grow your tree of falsehood from a small grain of truth'.³⁷⁸ The post-ideological distrust of words is internalised by Szirtes' speaker, as shown in the punning conflation of 'truth and 'falsehood' in 'Street Entertainment' (*Bridge Passages* 43-4):

I'm only a reporter whose truth lies
in diction clear as water. In the pool
which I imagine by my shoes
I try to see my features, read my eyes.
It ripples (43).

No less than Smith, Szirtes firmly holds back from appropriating and adapting the disruptions of 1989 to a comfortable, deterministic 'narrative'. In *Bridge Passages*, deflation is his typical mode of handling history: 'everything was out there: lust/and loneliness, the neon razzmatazz/ of passing time, and time too passing on/ to things a passage can adjust.' ('Bridge Passage', 29). However, his family history, which first brought him back to his native country in 1984, prompted an urgent need to relate 'from within' to that unique moment of transition, and to investigate the 'shadows at the heart of the carnival'.³⁷⁹ Szirtes' most challenging poems about Hungary span in fact a wider historical spectrum than 1989-90 and should be read together with Szirtes' later essays on 'the state of Eastern Europe', like the foreword which introduces his retrospective collection *The Budapest File*, and a number of essays published between 1990 and the noughts.

The provisionality of changes resonates through Szirtes' fragmentary pieces, scenes from domestic life where words strain to capture the sense of history to no avail. Phrases like the 'storm which lay the human pattern waste' reveal the emptiness of clichés: 'history' seems constantly beyond the observer's ability to grasp it. The poet's voice hovers therefore between the momentous and the uncannily trivial, as happens in poems such as 'A Woman with a Rug' which establish the very groundtone of *Bridge Passages*:

Three loud cracks. A woman with a rug
is beating it against the rails. A rich green

³⁷⁸ Miłosz, 'Child of Europe', p. 84.

³⁷⁹ George Steiner, untitled essay, *Granta 30: New Europe!* (1990), pp. 129-33, p.129.

flares and droops from her hands, then snap!
 It's gone. It is as if she'd pulled the plug
 on the streets: everything is quiet again,
 back within its trap.

In the nearby theatre, Tuzenbach's on fire
 with one of his neurotic rhapsodies.
 [...] He seems to miss,
 the tragic dimension which is rightly theirs,
 their words and images (11)

Though this 'tragic dimension' is relevant to Szirtes' personal anamnesis, and is already palpable in his previous collections, what this poem dramatises is the sense of paralysis provoked by the past's oppressive yet unreadable presence. Glimpsed in one of the numberless courtyards of Budapest which fascinate Szirtes,³⁸⁰ the scene struggles towards an epiphany which is nevertheless denied: no longer 'turning its stately back/ on public matters' (*Budapest File* 107), the street symbolises a new opening, but from the observer's viewpoint, something is unmistakably lost:

Meanwhile the woman tucks
 the rug under her arm and looks across
 in one of those lost moments
 that can't be measured by the usual clocks,
 so immobile and permanent, its loss
 will never be noted in documents [...]

Already past, the present moment recedes to become as undecipherable as the inhabitants' 'tragic' background: like the past, it is volatile and unreadable, and 'rolls down its intoxicating historical path'.³⁸¹

In Szirtes' representation of Hungary, the past tunnels into the present and viceversa: all the frames he depicts contain the sense of flawed epiphany which informs 'A Woman with a Rug', as if the central image, however neat, were always surrounded by 'apprehensions' (a recurring

³⁸⁰ In his early collection *Photographer in Winter*, Szirtes devotes a long sequence to the 'courtyards of Budapest', which was later reprinted in *The Budapest File* (pp.107-11).

³⁸¹ Szirtes, 'The Underground in the underground', BBC Radio 4, 28 Nov.1989. Transcript available at www.georgeszirtes.co.uk/dynamic/articles/underground.html [24 July 2008].

term in Szirtes) of a tragic but unexperienced past. Szirtes, who was trained as a painter, addresses this feeling obliquely, appealing to the domain of figurative arts and above all of photography. He overtly associates history to a ‘series of frozen frames’ (‘History’): capturing and going beyond a momentous frame of history means, in his view, to display the photographer’s ability to work on a ‘blind field’, to balance between the *studium* (‘that which resides in the photograph for study, that which attracts the viewer towards it out of historical, cultural, personal interests’) and the *punctum* of the ‘scene’, that is the ‘detail of the particular image that pricks or pierces the individual viewer [...] captured into a space seemingly contained within the image itself but really an imagined vestige of that reality.’³⁸²

In his 1994 collection *Blind Field*, Szirtes borrows from Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, where the *punctum* is described the “‘thinking eye’ which makes [us] add something to the photograph’, resulting into a ‘blind field that constantly doubles our vision’.³⁸³ Szirtes seems to use the ‘blind field’ to relate to the suspended tension between what appears in his objective and what his frames ‘withhold’. This enables him to turn his reportage to political effect, capturing a real moment of suspension between the present and the past in the Hungarian struggle for liberation. His focus on what surrounds the ‘image of upheavals’ is particularly in keeping with the peculiar, Hungarian version of ‘post-memory’ and reconstruction which began, in fact, in the eighties. In the streets, it is still possible to meet the victims of 1956: ‘the dead stand perpendicular with heads ablaze/ and leave small patches of darkness like footsteps about town’ which haunt the visitor in ‘Day of the Dead, Budapest’ (*Budapest File* 111).

A concern with the way the present drifts in and out of the past seems integral to the commitment likewise displayed by Smith, who, also taking his cue from photography, often refers to ‘retinal memories’ or to the ‘persistence of vision’ as metaphors for our apprehension of continuity despite disintegration.³⁸⁴ Not accidentally, both poets articulate Eastern Europe’s problematic engagement to its past through similar images, which symbolise a ghastly re-

³⁸² Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, pp. 114-5.

³⁸³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Flamingo, 1984), p. 48. Szirtes’ reworking of Barthes’ theory is also explored by Michael Murphy, *Poetry in Exile: A study of the Poetry of W.H.Auden, Joseph Brodsky and George Szirtes* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2004), pp. 145-152.

³⁸⁴ See Smith, *You Again*, p. 99 and p. 141.

emergence of hidden ghosts and which really ‘double’ the readers’ vision. In Szirtes’ ‘A Game of Statues’ (*Bridge Passages* 41-2), statues rather than people tread the city (Budapest), ‘vertical’ on their stone-beds and surrealistically replacing the allegories which punctuate the city’s neoclassical friezes:

A hidden population of statues
emerges from the shadows to be pressed
between the brickwork till the terraces
are packed with ancient vices and virtues

pouting and posturing. Their breasts and biceps curve
against the sunlight which first called them out [...] (41)

This image harks back to a crucial passage in Smith’s *Berlin*, where one of Smith’s interviewees, an ‘Ossi’ (Easterner) called Peter illustrates some of the mural sculptures he realises by using discarded plaster: the first of Peter’s works, called ‘*work on what had been spoiled*, [is] a large square of cloth and plaster, [where] through the folds of the plaster faces are peering, as if pressing through the Wall’ (*Berlin*, 104). In the picture Smith reproduces in his book, faces and half-figures re-emerge out of walls as if cast in *bas-relief*. As in Szirtes’ poem, half-sketched ‘statues’ become a grotesque image of peoples no longer held captive within political borders but somehow stuck in their past. Whenever those people meet foreigners, ghosts are released, as happens in Smith’s 1993 volume *Tender to the Queen of Spain* and poems like ‘Johannes from Dresden’³⁸⁵ or in ‘A survivor’s memoir’, where the speaker is haunted by his shadows: ‘that was 1942, the spring,/ years from home, prison wire, prison trains,/ a few necessary words the heart remembers’ (*Shed*, 186).

The re-emergence of persistent visions is crucial to these poets’ response to Eastern Europe. It is not, in fact, only the backward perspective that fuelled their interest in the former Other. Both moved backward and forward in time, across and through the Central-Eastern European regions dramatically re-emerged to the literate and historical consciousness. Both continued to travel through and across Eastern Europe during the nineties: Szirtes visited Hungary, Romania

³⁸⁵ ‘Johannes from Dresden’ in *Tender to the Queen of Spain* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1993), p.21.

and the Czech republic, though only the first two countries feature in his poetry; Smith, who realised documentary travelogues in verse about Hungary and Belgrade, travelled across the southern and the central regions, up to Transylvania, Slovakia, Serbia and the Ukraine.

These journeys sharpened their sensitivity to the voices of Eastern Europe, as shown by their stylistic choices. The need to slow down the pace of reportage resulted in these poets' decisive swerving toward lyricised forms of narrative, as they gradually drew closer to Eastern Europe's present and past 'stories'. This redirection intervened to bridge the gap between documentary requirements and the lyrical afflatus which distinguishes them,³⁸⁶ and to contain the fractured historical consciousness which defines their generation. They became attuned to a distrust of 'history' gradually internalised as they travelled eastwards, stumbling at first into the demarcation still obliquely present in Smith's post-wall 'The Wall':

There is one side and the other,
and between there is the wall. Each side
has its monuments, its flags, its currency,
its bulletholes, its notion of the other (58)

Both Smith and Szirtes attempted to find out to what extent the former West and the East might continue to entertain notions of each other: part of their poetry and essays explored and exploded the former Cold War opposition, thus providing stimulating insights into the state of 'the West' by undermining the enduring symmetric vision which ironically features in Smith's poem.

V.2 Towards the post-1989 context: Western 'order' vs. Eastern 'disorder'

In Adam Czerniawski's meditation of the pastoral mode (both as a genre and as the ideology underlying it) on the edge of the 1990s, the 'wild' East is significantly seen as affecting and infecting the 'English garden' of progressive Western civilisation. In the poem, the West's 'neatly ordered dreams' frame the attempt to come to terms with, contain or redress, the impact

³⁸⁶ Sean O'Brien addresses the question of lyricism in both Smith's and Szirtes' poetry in, respectively, *Deregulated Muse*, pp. 81-88 and 'Big Questions', *Poetry Review* 78:3 (1986), 56-8.

of history on ‘those/who have not known peace: /bloodily mutilated, crushed/ against walls.’³⁸⁷ The Polish poet describes the ‘wild East’ of the victims of oppression and wars both remote and recent, but also reconfigures it also cast as the West’s ‘terra incognita’: ‘ashes/silently invade/herbaceous borders, verandas and lawns’. As John Sears maintains, this image captures ‘a momentary horror, the insidious permeating of English pastoral tranquillity by the destructive realities’ of recent European history.³⁸⁸ It ultimately disrupts the enduring opposition between Eastern ‘disorder’ and Western order by suggesting an ideologically threatening permeability between the two polarities.

Smith and Szirtes likewise interrogated this moment of capsizing, when the historical ‘density’ of the East started to affect the West, and the very idea of making history had to be re-shaped. To return to Smith’s words, to ‘overhear, hear on the street’, even mistranslate the former half of Europe became crucial to reveal a basic ‘dread of disorder’³⁸⁹ inscribed within, rather than glimpsed from without, the comfortable domain of ‘Europe’.

Of course, to face the East first entailed being alerted to the snares of ‘naive’, but in fact prejudiced, observation: for both Szirtes and Smith, the other side of Eastern opacity is actually a whole set of images, stereotypes, and clichés which in the post-Wall years resumed and updated the Cold War imagination, in a domestication of difference which is tackled by Lidia Vianu in her survey of post-Wall fiction and which includes the ‘picturesque’ misery and the rooted corruption of the ‘Wild East’.³⁹⁰ Clichés play a marginal but poignantly demystifying role in both writers. In Smith’s 1998 collection *Wild Root*, demystification is essential.³⁹¹ Set against the background of Ukrainian post-communism, Smith’s ‘Moscow Dogs’, for example, captures Eastern misery with wry humour, using word-play inspired by *Animal Farm*:

Sasha says:
all the chairs in here are broken

³⁸⁷ Adam Czerniawski, ‘Contained in the Order of an English Landscape’ *Poetry Review* 81:3 (1991), p.34.

³⁸⁸ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 141.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.144.

³⁹⁰ Vianu, *Desperado Age*, pp. 50- 57.

³⁹¹ Ken Smith, *Wild Root* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe: 1998). The collection includes various poems and two sequences inspired by Central and Eastern Europe (‘Hungarian Quartet’ and ‘Wire through the Heart’), which were also published in Hungary and which Smith included in *Shed*.

though some are more broken than others.

Outside over the garbage cans visited
every few minutes by the old and the poor
a white plastic bag drifts on the updraughts

so delicately, riding the air,
settles on the new leaves of the cotton tree
just above the steps to the door that never opens.

The only reply:
three legs good, four legs better (Shed 262)

Szirtes does not glide over the desolation of economic demise ('the smell of lives held cheap'): despite his overwhelming fascination with Hungarian cityscapes, in poems which address post-Wall Eastern European atmosphere, misery and picturesque beauty are not associated. His depiction is at once too specific and contrived to rely on stereotype: again, it is as if the 'visitor' experienced the sad, Eastern beauty with an increasing impression of its impenetrability. In 'Drawing the Curtain' (another 'sketch' from *Bridge Passages*) Pest fascinates the returning emigrant with its baroque and Art Nouveau buildings, reminders of its typically European charm and stylistic contamination; at the same time, geometries, friezes and stuccoes become an impenetrable geography, puzzling the visitor who wants to know more:

'Observe the convolutions of this frieze.'
The voice comes to me like a tourist guide
explaining the explicable.
To slide your hand behind the stucco, seize
the mortar and move gently round inside
makes sensuous and tangible (3)

The image of words scraping façades returns throughout *Bridge Passages* and powerfully translates the sense of bafflement which permeates Szirtes' post-Wall essays, where the reporter's fascination with the exotic verges on frustration: 'If only I can twist my words [...] or get them to scrape the façade off that building, I will have accomplished something.'³⁹²

³⁹² Szirtes, 'The March Marches: a Progress Report from Budapest', *Poetry Review* 79:3 (1989), 15.

Architecture being the most apparent expression of an ‘order’ imposed on social spaces, the troping of Budapest and Hungary as architectural mazes is quite significant. While conveying the aesthetic orientation and formation of this poet, this choice hints at Szirtes’ constant uneasiness with deciphering what lies behind those urban geometries, or at his need to contain their ‘excrescences’. Crucial to his visual framing of Budapest, convolution is aptly moulded on his typically digressive description. In ‘Four Circles’ (*Budapest File*), for example, the city appears

Curled about the double bend of its river, on one side snuggling
to cliffs and hills where the cool air shuffles through a park with
cedars,
a cogwheeled railway, a deserted tram stop,
some concrete tables for ping-pong or for chess,
and benches where migrant workers from Romania
sleep to shave in the morning by a working fountain,
hearing at night the wind [...] trailing a cloak
of lightbulbs and shoptags over the gentler slopes
which are peopled with villas and baroque excrescences (106)

As happens in the opening sequence of *Bridge Passages*, the speaker is often lost in the city: he ‘could be anywhere’ (‘Bridge Passage’), and an exasperating sense of disorientation haunts him throughout the collection.

This shock is even more evident in Smith, whose journeys across borderlands and transit zones (Hungary/Romania/Transylvania; Slovakia/the Ukraine) are pervaded by the lack of temporal and spatial points of references: he too ‘could be anywhere’ (‘The Night Anywhere’). Displacement is a key feeling, though in *Wild Root* Smith’s gift as a ‘nature poet’ in depicting landscapes muffles it, as happens in the twin poems ‘September distance’ and ‘Night Train’:

A blur of birches. Borders
that are more than what you feel there,
wind rushing the reeds, long wing
of wild geese flying south, sunflowers,
poppyheads and milkweed [...]

And in a flash of sudden neon
a tall crane in a field of wrecked cars.
It is the night of old shoes, their mouths
slackly open: *where now brother,*
how long was yesterday,

how many days until tomorrow? (Shed 258)

Eastern Europe, which in Szirtes is the impenetrable, urban, convoluted ‘otherness’, becomes in Smith a natural landscape which unfolds before the poet’s objective. In both cases, the poet’s aesthetic response is also a response to the temporal dimension of Eastern Europe: Szirtes’ digressive style is a means to face compression, whereas Smith accommodates the sense of looseness which makes history seem as remote as the ‘blur of birches’.

While pacing and visual frames translate Szirtes’ and Smith’s responses to two different landscapes, the speakers behind the camera are hardly audible. The would-be witness is, in both cases, so affected by the distinctive *tempo* he encounters ‘on the other side’ of Europe that he somehow disappears. While this reaction results in further, distinctive modes of representing Eastern Europe, it seems firmly rooted on the shared, undisguised concern with the ‘disappearance’ of historical sense in their native (in Szirtes’ case, ‘adopted’) country both poets conveyed in their early poetry. Their overwhelming preoccupation with ‘by whom’ history is written is coupled by the question of how it is forgotten by those who *write* it.

Szirtes’ desire in ‘History’ to ‘speak as a witness’ thus surfaces in the words uttered by ‘John’, one of Smith’s alter egos: ‘I am the man that can never spell straight,/ the envoy of a country that won’t negotiate [...] always on the shore of great events, almost a witness [...] I’m the missing witness. And they never ask’ (*Shed*, 74-6). ‘John’’s words provide an interesting clue to the sense of ‘historical thinness’ which Szirtes attributes to us/Western Europe, relocating it in the specific context of Great Britain and England. Here too, disorientation is a dominant feeling: the poet is the ‘missing witness’, ‘on the shore of great events’. What his words (‘and they never ask’) reveal, however, is not the grey uneventfulness often associated to late modern versions of the English pastoral (‘England is the same/cheering to order’³⁹³), but an eventful world which can choose to dispense with its witnesses. So in *The Heart, the Border*, John becomes the anonymous labourer of ‘Chinese Whispers’, Smith’s ‘parable’ on post-1989 reality, where a ‘Chinese Wall’ represents the future built by similar, faceless and disposable workers :

³⁹³ Glyn Maxwell, ‘Letter to Edward Thomas’ in *The Breakage* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p.27.

my thoughts could be either of theirs. When one of them dies he is replaced, when I die the line will move up in my place, and the stones go on climbing the mountain, assembling into the wall. Only the wall grows, but we will never see it [...] When at dark we sleep, exhausted, our sleep is the hard sleep of the same heavy stones moving up in the mountains' (61)

The paradox which underlies Smith's telescoping of history is that the labourer reasserts his need to speak and is called into self-presence by his own contribution to the building of the Wall. The order gleaned from the Wall is not reassuring, and the labourer's voice both yields to and denounces a sense of political and social exhaustion.

A specific sense of historic and 'cultural exhaustion'³⁹⁴ has been detected in Szirtes' work as well and informs his most political poems about 'the West' and home, though in his case, it seems inextricable from his status as an émigré. If Szirtes' poetry overtly contends with 'pastoral modes' and often demystifies 'the construction of an England outmoded in historical terms, disconnected from the contemporary world',³⁹⁵ his own sense of exhaustion is fuelled by an underlying impatience with 'historical thinness' which is often only obliquely addressed. 'Meeting Austerlitz', a poem from his 2004 collection *Reel*, exposes this feeling by fictively addressing another naturalised writer, W.G. Sebald.³⁹⁶

Szirtes' *doppelgänger*, Sebald features as an Eliotesque 'compound ghost' and is renamed after the main character in Sebald's 1999 novel *Austerlitz*. The novel portrays a Jewish emigrant who literally haunts the narrator's journeys across Europe with his mysterious past. This is symbolically rendered through his obsessions for trains, as symbols of a remapped world of planned and safe destinations on which Austerlitz's Jewish background – a reminder of the meaning 'trains' and 'Europe' took on between 1933 and 1939 – casts many shadows. In tune with intellectuals like Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, Sebald's Benjaminian perception of 'time'

³⁹⁴ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 143.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165. Sears deals extensively with the deconstruction of the pastoral mode in Szirtes' early collection *The Slant Door* and the 1994 collection *An English Apocalypse* and provides sharp analyses of Szirtes' return to Hungary as filtered by this deconstructive drive.

³⁹⁶ George Szirtes, *Reel* (Newcastle on Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2004). 'Reel' was written in 2001 after Sebald's sudden death. The collection includes a sections about Szirtes' childhood in Hungary, 'Flesh: An Early Family History' (30-59).

aligns him to a kind of ‘Central-European’ consciousness: ‘progress [does not] constantly move forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption [...] and evolves in no-one knows what direction...’³⁹⁷ Szirtes’ Austerlitz-Sebald, whose voice is ‘internalised’ in his interlocutor’s head, conflates instead the fictional Austerlitz and the real Sebald, retaining the former’s sense of the absurdity of ‘history’ as an imposition of order, meaning, and direction on time and the latter’s apparent impatience with meditations, heightened by his post-mortem, baffling sense of life.

‘Austerlitz’ engages his interlocutor with a sort of parable about a sick doctor, which is Audenesque in its suggestion of psycho-physiological malaise. He then goes on denouncing the futility of ‘human time’, using the metaphor of photography (also taken from Auden) to reproduce history as a series of flare-ups:

*We can distil
Our terrors and make them hang like a grey mist
beyond the garden, somehow peripheral
[...]
Demons are inevitably oversized*

*by our usual standards. We remain polite,
value nobility, and the poor doctor was the most
courteous of people until that night.*

*Things just add up, especially the lost
things. He breathed out and the air stood still
before it vanished slowly like a ghost.*

But I was not prepared to let him go
so easily. I knew that in his mind
there was a tendency to counter-flow

and double exposure. He would unwind
the world of memory and wind it up again
a little off-centre as though it were a blind

or hedge against bad luck. *You can’t explain
history to itself*, he said. *Humankind must train
itself to refocus or employ mirrors.*

³⁹⁷ W.G.Sebald, *Austerlitz* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 101.

[...]

*It is names we journey through:
They're landscapes of what ever happens and goes
on happening as we progress, neither old nor new.
Take photographs, the way a flashbulb blows
your swollen shadow up against the wall
behind you. A momentary perception grows*

into an image (Reel 20-21)

‘Meeting Austerlitz’ resumes and intertwines some of Szirtes’ leitmotifs. The moment of retrospection translated into a ‘descent into the world of the dead’, the sense that ‘history cannot be explained to itself’, and the contrived indeterminacy of judgement are all staple ingredients of Szirtes’ poetry and will be encountered further below. What is worth remarking is that Szirtes himself engages here with ‘double exposure’: by elegising Sebald, he both defines and recognises a condition of inner emigration which moves between the difficult recognition of belatedness (‘things just add up’), and the attending urgency to confront with history (‘A swollen perception grows/ into an image’), which may collapse into wariness and inadequacy (Austerlitz is even defined as ‘ridiculous’). Through Austerlitz’s words, Szirtes ultimately contrasts feelings voiced by his *personae* with his poetic mode: his complaint that ‘History’ is merely delusive (‘It was once upon a time/ it was history,/ it was the day before, the day that never happened’)³⁹⁸ is therefore retrospectively seen as both coterminous and contrasting with the poet’s effort to ‘make a momentary perception grow into an image’, as happens in ‘A Woman with a Rug’.

Szirtes’ poem is a textbook example of his indirect way of elaborating a highly personal situation at one remove, using narrated dialogues in order to reproduce ‘a writerly experience of imagined being-together, a connectedness in which the specificity of the self is momentarily compromised in acknowledgement of the other.’³⁹⁹ It is likewise indicative of Szirtes’ willingness to engage with other voices (that of Sebald and indirectly the modernist voices encoded in his style) and to expose a thwarted historical consciousness, by playing Austerlitz’s

³⁹⁸ Szirtes, ‘History’, p. 43. See ch. 1, p. ff.

³⁹⁹ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 174.

Central-European background against a frigid, and again Audenesque, British landscape ('the cold sat down with frozen fingers. Cars/were iced up, the pavement treacherous').

Despite his claims ('I have never actually tried to be a foreign writer, I wanted to be an English one [and] the success might lie in the failure'),⁴⁰⁰ Szirtes has typically been recognised as a *Anglo-Hungarian* writer, and his status as an émigré has been overtly foregrounded after his return to Hungary in the eighties and his activity as a translator. Szirtes has repeatedly returned on the emblematic position of the immigrant in a multi-cultural age. He expresses this feeling in his preface to *The Budapest File*:

I did not set out to 'write' either Hungary or England. These national (let alone nationalistic) concepts are incidental, and often, to my mind, harmful. Becoming aware of places as background subjects inevitably brought them into the foreground, but their advance into fuller consciousness was accompanied, for me, by a growing realisation of a third, and possibly more pervasive theme, which threatened to negate both places.

My greatest difficulty with nationally or culturally rooted notions is that they inevitably exclude those who are migrants, floaters, drifters and shadows. I may envy the rooted but I cannot enter their territory [...] The tribeless cannot simply put on the appropriate headdress. It is not Hungary or any other place that is the issue. It is the inbetweenness. [15]

Szirtes' stress on inbetweenness supports the notion of the 'exilic' condition which may work as a bulwark against a world where 'borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can [...] become prisons'.⁴⁰¹ Exile provides a reading key to the interbreeding of histories through which historical consciousness accrues but where the experiences of 'the floaters and the drifters' constantly risk to fade away or be crushed by the 'directions' imposed by nationally or culturally rooted nations. The migrant thus resists retrospective determinism: Austerlitz's claim, 'going is what we deserved/and welcome' (*Reel 24*) turns into a subtly antiphrastic statement.

⁴⁰⁰ George Szirtes, 'Interview with Lidia Vianu'. Available at http://www.lidiavianu.go.ro/george_szirtes.htm [8 April 2008]

⁴⁰¹ Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', in *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trin Minha and Cornel West (Cambridge Massachusetts: Mit Press, 1990), pp. 357-363, p. 363.

Szirtes' reflection frames the very gist of mid-eighties cross-curtain debates in a renewed, post-Wall dimension. More specifically, it links up with Kundera' notion of Central-Eastern Europe as geo-politically marginal and marginalised by historical 'progress', but in fact central to the history of Western civilisation as such. Significantly enough, Szirtes' insights chime with Smith's early considerations about Eastern Europe. During his travels, Smith seems to find a dimension, if not a state of mind, appropriate for his poetry. Displacement is actually part of Smith's poetic personality and his apprehension of historically and socially different realities. Despite his role as a former working-class, Northern English voice, Smith typically regards himself as culturally uprooted, and considers displacement as a fruitful, archetypal condition:

In all ages and at all times in so far as I can tell in most places there's the wanderer...he is an exile in one sense or another, he is a critic [...] he knows, as those who have never been outside their cultural space do not, that there are no absolute standards. He knows that time and place and context change the rules [...] and that there are no circumstances when any rule may not merely be violated, but dropped.⁴⁰²

As Francis Doerr points out, 'Smith's territory is the border: he was himself a product of border regions – a native of Yorkshire and a member of the working class'.⁴⁰³ Smith's travels, his Northern background and the uncertain, presumably Irish, origins of his father's family surface in his work up to the mid- and late eighties.⁴⁰⁴ Smith's sense of socio-cultural uprootedness produced several variations on the theme of the 'Wanderer', both a recurrent intertextual reference and an anthropologic archetype. Yet it was only toward the mid-eighties, when the 'latter-day travelling scribe'⁴⁰⁵ wandered across Eastern Europe, that he was able to accommodate his supple, 'monological' form to attune himself to the lost voices released by distant borders.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Ken Smith, 'The Wanderer Yacob' *Acumen* 44 (2002), p. 109.

⁴⁰³ Francis Doerr, 'Likely through the Stones: Running in the border Lands with Ken Smith' *Stand* 6:1 (2005), pp. 30-34, p.33.

⁴⁰⁴ See 'Two Letters from Ken Smith' *You Again*, pp. 122-36.

⁴⁰⁵ Colin Raw, 'Best, Ken: Letters and an Interview' *You Again*, pp. 96-121, p. 114.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.112.

The typical Smith persona is unhappy with his (at times, her) sense of disorientation and sharply exposes it. This is visible even before *The Heart, the Border*, in a sequence from *Wormwood* (1987) which revolves on what was soon to body forth a new dimension of Ruritania, Yugoslavia. In this case, the Western ‘reporter’ writing in the midst of a literary soirée is fascinated by the ‘exotic confusion’, but as the first signs of instability emerge, he also feels charged with a precise sense of responsibility, the impulse to share other peoples’ fate:

On the seventh day of singing,
on the sixth day of laughing,
a man fell from the fifth floor
dead at my feet in a sheet
but his last breath blew through me
with all the bad air of the city.
This was his last day. He jumped
down the air with our voices
last to next door in his skull,
now I bear him a little way on.
The rest was parts put together,
Drinking toasts, declaring *stop*
Hunger stop war stop bomb stop
to the actors without shadows,
the smooth-suited, the well-fed.
Miodrag or Pedrag, he jumped
down the world’s well. Share him. (*Shed* 100)

‘Serbian Letters’ provides just some hints of the sympathetic attitude toward Eastern Europe which surfaces in *The Heart, the Border* and the subsequent collection *Wild Root*, and which was encouraged by Smith’s confrontation with a reality where self-identification, the normal parameters of definition and judgement, pose specific challenges. This confrontation was thrown into sharper, political relief as Smith moved eastwards, between the late eighties and the late nineties:

I decided to get away from [England] and travelled, sometimes in Eastern Europe, where the borders were beginning to open. And as I crossed them I began to think about borders, the frontiers of political states, the magic lines where the writ of one *régime* runs out and another begins, where definitions of right and wrong can interchange. (*You Again* 88-89)

This kind of reflection resumes Kundera's notion of pre-Wall Europe as boundary-stricken, constrained into 'political frontiers [...] which are inauthentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests, and occupations'. However, since it was written when the ideological pressures of the pre-Wall years were dying out, Smith's evaluation of the relativity and the anarchic potential inherent in Eastern 'frontiers' is quite striking.

Smith's sense of the extra-territoriality of 'borderlands' resembles Szirtes' insistence on the perspective acquired by 'floaters', by those who move along 'subcultural corridors, borders [which are] sanctuaries for the deterritorialized'.⁴⁰⁷ Smith's borders turn exile into a static condition which may nevertheless become positively dynamic, and thus encourage the meeting with the stranger or the 'wanderer'. Rather than Eastern 'disorder', Smith foregrounds the extreme 'fluidity' of 'marginal identities' which has been seen as a landmark of late or post-modernity and as a way to demystify essentialist notions of cultural identity (the ideological armoury inherent in the resurgence of 'nationalism' and its reversal, 'regionalism'). Not accidentally, Hungary retains a specific appeal for Smith, and Hungarians are represented as 'emblematic' of an extremely provisional sense of identity, torn between the opposite pulls of identification and disidentification with the 'conquerers':

My interest in Hungary is stimulated by this business of borders and I focus in on that in the 'Wire through the heart' sequence in *Wild Root*. Hungary gets to be a Kingdom; Hungary gets to be an Empire. Yet Hungary is somehow not enough. It gets absorbed into Austria-Hungary but has borders around its population, and its minorities whom the language excludes. The sense of identity is cemented through the language. Then, suddenly, once again Hungary is on the wrong side and they lose the war. They're now trapped within these much more confined borders with a lot of their co-Hungarians living outside. And how these different groups relate to the different governments they're under is what I find fascinating.⁴⁰⁸

Of course, this evaluation of Hungary betrays Smith's sensitivity to the peculiar shift Eastern Europe underwent as it transited from the order imposed by the Soviets to the post-Wall disorder, which is often regarded as consistent with this region's 'historical' anomy. He is deeply

⁴⁰⁷ Francis Doerr, 'Likely through the Stones', p. 33. On the notion of the East as 'Ruritania', see p. 64, n. 137.

⁴⁰⁸ Colin Raw, 'The Godfather of the New Poetry', *You Again*, pp.137-145, pp. 143-4.

aware of the fact that the ‘natural’ anarchy typical of borderlands might degenerate into anomy and that in the post-Wall years this process encouraged the subjugation and silencing of several peoples. Characteristically, anomy is translated into the silence of the borders, represented in Smith’s poetry by his concern with landscapes where only nature speaks, and the voice of history is simply unheard: ‘Neither nation nor map, I keep only this mind’s country: / farms and sheep crouched in together, / an eternal rooting of grass.’⁴⁰⁹ Set against cities ‘yellow with absences’, a soil of misery, milestones bear their inscriptions till meaning fades, and the stones become boulders, pebbles or simply:

stones, bunched in riverbeds,
abandoned on plains,
lie down anywhere.
They will not answer
out of the strange mouth
of the dead.

In Smith’s post-Wall poems, the silence of the borders is not violated by the imposition of law but by the lurking instability where conflicts at any time might explode, devastate, flow unrecorded into the ebb of history. In his long monologue ‘The Shadow of God’ (*Shed* 267-77), the ‘Other’ becomes a Balkanised East; borders shift confusing the chronicler and no State, no government, no people reclaim their ‘writ’:

Overhead the high jets in the clear blue
corridor of cloudless sky above Serbia,
flying the line of the great rivers
whose names are the same though the names
of the empires and the nations shift
on the maps. South of here, not far,
in the debatable lands of the warring states
the bones are again rising in the mud.

[...]

Each with his patch to scratch, each
his yard to guard, each with his own
view of the world, his own particular opinion
he will not give up easily.

⁴⁰⁹ Ken Smith, *The Pity*, p. 20.

Wars begin with this and end whimpering (272-3)

Apocryphal history, to which this ‘whimpering’ leads, is to be feared and despite the Eastern setting Smith chooses here, is not an exclusively ‘Eastern’ dimension. Smith’s anxiety about silence pervades, in fact, his moral and political disillusionment with contemporary Great Britain, or England.

In his view, England is a basically anomic reality where the power to ‘order’ reality is regarded as coercive and oppressive: ‘what they are doing is preying on people’s intimidation [...] and they are researching very frightening things – crowd control, people control’.⁴¹⁰ In Smith’s poems, coercion is sensed, for example, in the extra-jurisdictional spaces, such as the prison described in *Wormwood*, where the definitions of right and wrong are deliberately blurred, and blurring is instrumental to the exclusion of outsiders and non-conformers. ‘Don’t say guilt, don’t say innocent./ Suspend disbelief. Say *the convicted*./ Say *the problem of male violence*,’ says the poet’s *persona*, as he visits the boys in the wings. The boys have names but lose their individuality and cannot name their crimes. Their experience is emblematic of a society where the individual is deemed ‘responsible’ for his/her acts, but this word only disguises a wider demise of responsibility: ‘He can say/ *I was responsible*, can’t say/ *I killed her* (*Shed*, 124).

Significantly enough, it is in the English poems of *The Heart, the Border* that this theme becomes central. In ‘Against the Grain’, the collective demise of responsibility is denounced as the witness speaks up and points to crimes never mentioned, nor considered as such:

Someone must count them, the bodies that come up
one by one out of the fire, up from
the gloomy cradle of the North Sea,
that has weighted and washed them, months.

Someone must number them, name each one
by the fingerprints, the rings, by the teeth,
someone must stare at the remnants of the dead
from Zeebrugge, Kings Cross, Piper Alpha. [...] (20)

⁴¹⁰ David Chrystal and Tim Cuning, ‘“Tough Shit Plato”: The Ken Smith Interviews’, *You Again*, pp. 146-56, p.151.

No less than distant conflicts, post-Thatcher Britain worries Smith. His *personae* are obsessed with human losses and ecologic disasters no progress might ever redeem: the speaker knows that no one will count the dead ‘*that we bought and paid for,*’ and that power lies also in this kind of silencing.

Echoes of Smith’s anger can be heard in the charges Szirtes levels against ‘England’. In ‘Assassins’ (*Budapest File*, 116), disconnection between public and private leads to a standstill, problems are experienced as ‘individual pockets of anxiety’⁴¹¹ and only the dramatic conclusions of individual histories are ‘public’:

I think of an England where the ghosts
are restless solitaires or assassins.
They cannot speak but run about in sunlight
demanding restoration of the birch
and death as public as crime is private.
They have lost time.

If in *The Heart, the Border* Smith imagines ‘England’ as a block of turf ‘falling off the back of a lorry’ (‘Running on Empty’, 24), Szirtes’ engagement with what remains of the orderly garden has been even more sustained in poems written after 1989 and included – together with Szirtes’ major poems about Hungary – in *The Budapest File*, such as ‘The Idea of Order on the József Attila Estate’:⁴¹²

The lawns are in order, someone is keeping them neat.
No one has yet tipped rubbish down from the tenth floor.
People are walking their dogs or waiting for buses
As if they had taken to heart the architect’s fiction of order,
And saw their own lives in exploded and bird’s eye views.

[...]

It is peaceful and calm in their versions of being,
A dream of files and cabinets at uniform temperature
Where death entails merely a comfortless distancing,

⁴¹¹ Harrison, ‘Fire and Poetry’, p. 236.

⁴¹² The poem was actually first included in *Portrait of My Father in An English Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Something diffuse, clouds seen from the roof garden,
Thousands of breathing cells misting up windows (112)

Here, Szirtes transfers the nightmarish vision of communist order (the Communist housing Estate named after one of Hungary's greatest mid-century poets) to a post-Wall dimension which is not necessarily 'Eastern' but, as Sears argues, rather evokes a 'vision akin to that of John Betjeman's Planster.'⁴¹³ Szirtes 'sees' a rarefied world where 'the architect's fiction' makes any event, even crimes and death, appear at one remove. Order is seen as a tamed lawn, reaching forward to Czerniawski's use of the metaphor but also regarding the loss of 'history' as cause and result of the orderly project to shape history, to accommodate it within the late modern bureaucratic and archival memory where the individual is lost.⁴¹⁴ Even more overtly, if more abstractly, than in Smith, history turns into apocryphal fiction, not to the benefit of the estate's inhabitants (Smith's 'labourers') but to the benefit of impersonal, invisible architects.

Struggling against dehistoricized 'fictions' of order, both Szirtes and Smith provide representations of Eastern 'density', disorder, and obliquity which respond uniquely to Garton Ash's claim/allegation that 'the most recorded history is a history of memories.'⁴¹⁵ Szirtes and Smith read Eastern Europe through a sort of 'double vision' which retrieves the specific histories of individuals, naming the various victims 'crushed by walls', and presenting potentially subversive visions of this haunted land. It is therefore possible to see how they distinctively committed themselves to the representation of Eastern Europe, starting from Szirtes' attempts to pierce impenetrability and unfold 'historical convolutions' without aspiring to 'ordering' the past, and moving to Smith's own responses to the various, 'lost voices' (*You Again*, 116) he asks his audience to share.

⁴¹³ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 142.

⁴¹⁴ The garden, as a metaphor for the 'civilised' Western world, its 'rational' modernity – as a nemesis of the barbarity – has been variously used in the last decades of the twentieth century, and mostly by other writers and intellectuals whose life has confronted 'inbetweenness': from Zbigniew Herbert, who employs the opposition between civilisation and brutality as a working title for his collection of art essays *Barbarians in the Garden* (1986), to Zygmunt Bauman, in his whose reading the garden becomes the 'projectual' dimension of the future rooted in post-Enlightenment culture.

⁴¹⁵ Garton Ash, 'Bad Memories', p.289.

V.3. The dimension of the present moment and Hungary's past in George Szirtes' 'Budapest files'.

As early as 1989, George Szirtes' assessment of the Hungarian present left no doubt as to his anxiety about the fate of Hungary and Central-Eastern Europe: 'It is almost impossible to escape from politics at the moment [...], behind the rhetoric is the terror that all this change is merely temporary, that one false step and everything returns to square one, only worse.'⁴¹⁶ John Sears perceptively detects in *Bridge Passages* 'a sense of dislocated, fluctuating unreality, of perceptual confusion, a mood that matches itself to the giddy uncertainties of the events of 1989'.⁴¹⁷ This sense might originate in the poet's estrangement from the political upheavals of the late eighties, but as Szirtes' words reveal, it is also fuelled by his fear that changes might turn out to be delusive or ineffective. The 'blind field' his poems describe is typically defined by inaccessible private spaces ('a drawer, / a hidden box, addresses, numbers, names/ and letters'),⁴¹⁸ details of everyday life whose role as *puncti* (or reminders of the wider historical-cultural world which surround the photographer's *studium*) in Szirtes' 'photographs' conjures up a sense of expectation. In poems like 'A Sea Change', expectation is soon demystified by delusive revelation:

On the playground pingpong table someone scrawls
the words *New Fascists* with terrible irony.
The fearful and the ugly stalk
the spring as always. The fog's white terror calls
at dawn [...]

Behind the frosted glass
someone takes a shower. These things are done
precisely as before but feel
a little different now (13-4)

⁴¹⁶ 'The March Marches: A Progress Report from Budapest', *Poetry Review* 79:3 (1989), 16.

⁴¹⁷ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 95.

⁴¹⁸ Szirtes, 'A Domestic Faust', *Bridge Passages*, p.5.

Unreality is, however, also the result of a contrived strategy, which relies heavily on the sense that, as a stranger, the poet might capture hidden movements beneath the flow of history. This is made clear by Szirtes' oblique references to the past of his native country, which he often introduces by appealing to the witnesses of 1956. It is true that Szirtes translates the upheavals in images of storms and thawing which are clear correlatives of political turmoil and of the subsequent release of 1989-90. Even those 'natural metaphors of historical agency'⁴¹⁹ which counterpoint Szirtes' historical-political register result, however, in powerful deflation, and voices from Hungary's recent past are called in to support this strategy. This happens already in a poem written 'after József Attila', which was originally published in *Photographer in Winter* and republished in *The Budapest File*. In this retrospective collection, the poem is set against Szirtes' other poems about Hungary, including those featuring in *Bridge Passages*, and its demystifying gist offers an even more explicit counterpoint to the perspective of revolutions. József's oblique evocation of post-war terror, his ironic and tragic domestication of political matters through images of climatic changes are resumed by Szirtes' recurrent reference to the storms of 1989:

Mobs of wild grass bend and sway
fearing the dark has come to stay.

Their shuddering, however frail,
is good to teach their little ones
to bear the terror of the gale (75)

By means of derealisation and indirection, Szirtes responds to and relocates the overwhelming sense of absurdity which in Holub's view is nuclear to the Eastern European sensitivity and defines a precisely legacy of the Cold War years, when poets appealed to 'matter-of-factness as the basic defence against emptiness, concreteness as the counterweight to a lie'.⁴²⁰ Absurdity and helplessness spring from the superposition and clash between different movements, the half-suppressed retrieval of the 'Other' s past and the ambivalent assessment of the present moment.

⁴¹⁹ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 90.

⁴²⁰ Miroslav Holub, 'Poetry against absurdity', *Poetry Review* 81:2 (1990), 'Special Issue: Independent Europe', 24-28, p.24.

Szirtes' Budapest file(s) originate in the anxiety that the Cold War obsessive control of the past and its instrumental use might soon turn into a kind of indifference towards the past and its collapse into an abortive 'dream of order'.

The Cold War imagery used in 'Idea of Order' is, in fact, often used 'to be read in negative' (*Budapest File* 187): in his collections and especially in *Bridge Passages*, Szirtes addresses the East as East and not as a metaphor of the West. Most poems deny the potentially exhilarating idea underlying 'A Woman with a Rug', that the times when any moment, however trivial, was framed in documents are over; what they convey instead is the dread of a loss of history. In Szirtes' 'intermittent diary',⁴²¹ history is 'splintered into far too many sharp /small fragments' ('A Woman with a Rug') which the people may not wish to recompose: the opening of secret archives which, after 1989, resulted in a unique, hectic attempt of the Central-Eastern European peoples to retrieve their memories, and thus to repossess their past, typically turns into a nightmarish vision of fragmentation and dispossession. This feeling underlies the poem 'Recording', which opens *Bridge Passages* with Audenesque elusiveness, and tries to contain visions of disorder within neat quatrains:

A distant night train and a dog. Then crickets.
And fingers turning the leaves of a book.
Insects hover at the window. The hedges lean back.
Their curving arms are paths of rockets.

The final sensations are necessarily fragmentary,
like voices on a tape recorder repeating ...
and there's the horror. Somebody goes on quoting
fragments, unattributable, without memory (2)

The groundtone of the collection is thus established by downplaying the expected disclosures and linearity of the journal form and evoking an indefinite background, a dimension threatened by fragmentation and impersonality. Remarkably enough, the poem insists on the idea of anonymity or the non-attributability of past and present perceptions, thus denying the foregrounding of subjective, individual memory which characterised the immediate post-Wall

⁴²¹ Blurb of *Bridge Passages*. 'Diary' and 'journal' do not, however, suggest the impersonal mood which effectively runs throughout the collection, and is denied, as we shall see, only by a few shifts to the lyrical dimension signalled by the lyric 'I' and the speaker's address to 'you' (his mother).

period on the other side of the former Curtain. The kind of history made of intersecting paths of individual retrospection, which in many regards underlies the ‘fictional diary’ in *Metro*, is not so thoroughly embraced in *Bridge Passages*. Here, in fact, the Hungarian and East European dimension is often captured through a collective, non-individualised perspective distanced through the use of the collective pronoun (theirs) and the impersonal register of ‘Recording’.

Perspectival shifts add to the kind of ‘unreality’ exposed by the poet’s overwhelming distrust of language. A way to underline the poet’s deliberate detachment from what he witnesses is to exasperate his already mentioned distrust of words: from the very beginning, the perception that a ‘terror of rhetoric’ might be re-established is overwhelming. Terror does not merely stem from retrospective diagnosis: it is rather the projection of past fears into the present, and points to a newly forged language of change and revolution which might hide vacuity, uncertainty and staleness. These feelings pervade Szirtes’ response to what the blurb defines ‘the changing moods of the country as it is caught up in the tide seeping across Eastern Europe’ but are, in fact, well rooted in Szirtes’ previous collections; besides, though Szirtes’ privileged focus is Hungary, his concern with revolutions extends to other countries of the former Eastern bloc, like Romania.

‘Burns Night by the Danube’ (*Metro*, 43),⁴²² written ‘*in memoriam 1956*’, underlines both the provisionality of revolutions, including that of the mid-fifties, and their ultimate inconsistency. The poem reflects the atmosphere of transition which in the eighties led to the symbolic reburial of the non-radical icon of 1956, Imre Nagy. It was republished in *Budapest File* and, as happens with ‘After Attila’, it sounds even more effective when confronted with the post-1989 atmosphere:

A time for slogans: know them well.
Would any of them ring a bell?
You’d recognise them by the smell,
Proust’s *madelaines*.
They tease your tongue and cast their spell,
invade your teens.

Unreal applause, the names on tick,
a twitching body politic (43)

⁴²² The sonnet was re-published in *Budapest File*, before the ‘1989’ section (pp.103-5)

Distrust is increased by Szirtes' deliberately fragmentary style, which employs cinematic language and consequently refers forward to the structural metaphor of his collection *Reel*, which overtly collapses reality into fictional rewriting. The 'shadows at the heart of the carnival' stem here from the impression that even the history of spontaneous upheavals is constantly being rewritten in order to adjust it retrospectively or to obscure the losses any change demands.⁴²³ Szirtes' groundtone is sour despite the speaker's jocular, teasing attitude and the kind of redress offered by rhyming and formal pattern:

But everyone gets walk-on parts
in history. The action starts.
The scenes are shot. Bring on the carts,
remove the dying. [...]

If one could only keep all these
safely between parentheses,
initials carved in civic trees
to spite mere nature:
proclaiming in telegraphese
to the vast future:

*Specifics and particulars
are everything The burned-out cars
reveal their names. The city's scars
are told and entered
in the records. Death appears
to have repented (45)*

Szirtes' poems often contain a veiled critique of the Western attempts to frame the historical turmoil of the East, including the 1956 revolution on which the whole 'Europe' turned its back, within a safe narrative of repression and 'return' to civilisation. Szirtes plays on his in-between

⁴²³ In its teasing aspect, more particularly, 'Burns Nights' reminds one of later reflections on the comparison between Hungary's two important revolutions, which can be found in György Dalos' study *1956: Der Aufstand in Ungarn* (Bonn: BPB, 2008), which provides a retrospective analysis of the unearthing of the past undertaken by the Hungarians in the eighties.

status to underline his dissent with biased interpretations that still burn in the minds of those whose past he cannot truly share.

Distrust and disenchantment inspire Szirtes' subsequent depiction of a more controversial revolution, the Romanians' rebellion to the Ceausescu regime. Szirtes captures the stimulating atmosphere of conspiracy to which Romanian intelligentsia so consistently contributed, in the attempt to denounce the apparent limits of the 'revolution' which brought down the government but not its agencies.⁴²⁴ While trying again to fit his overflowing material into formal patterns, Szirtes sheds light on the ambiguities of the Romanian political scene, and thus ominously hints at the highly disappointing outcome of this revolution. This is thoroughly exposed in 'Romanian Brown' (*Budapest File* 163):

Political crises, shortages, rising crime.
The dictator's palace is unwittingly post-modern.
Life proceeds under the no-benign, now-stern
paternal gaze of Freudian Father Time.

If looks could kill ... in high-rise flats the click
of keyboards. The gentle sea-sigh of computers:
fingertips of neighbouring literatures
touch across the corpse of the body politic.

Editors and translators conspire in the cold (163)

As Szirtes puts it in the blurb of *Bridge Passages*, many of his poems between the eighties and the late nineties evoke political situations by using 'vignettes'. Very often, Szirtes uses a kind of 'telegraphese' strengthened by appositions, correspondence of line and sentence, and fractured syntax: his style alerts readers to a poetical voice which is quoting, parodying, or borrowing from other voices and from 'unattributable' history. Thus official phrasing, casual remarks and clichés (the revolutionary forces 'conspiring in the cold' as happened in the old, Cold War days) alternate to create interferences which despite the 'diary' form and the narrative cast of some of the sketches, make the speaker's very attitude quite difficult to gauge.

⁴²⁴ See Judt, *Post-War*, pp.622-26.

In other poems, however, Szirtes' 'telegraphese' is a language fraught with ambiguities and *double-entendres* which give the reporter's opinion away. For instance, the pun on the verb 'lie' detected beforehand is at the core of the collection's central isotopy of ambivalence, which creates a shady territory between the pre-Wall and the post-Wall dimension, oppression and freedom, institutionalised 'falsehood' and truth. Szirtes relies in fact on the very reversibility between the present and the past, or the Cold War age and the age of 'thawing': language becomes the very ghost which infects the present moment, in its public and private dimension. In *Bridge Passages* this happens, for example, in the fifth section of the title sequence.⁴²⁵ The 'Rain' of the title aptly evokes seasonal transition (Szirtes' poetry is punctuated by images of misty and rainy mornings); unlike previous poems set in Budapest, the poem's *studium* describes not courtyards but interiors where people 'sitting in their roofs/can hear [rain] talking but cannot tell/the nature of its message'. The metaphorical note Szirtes strikes in the beginning keys gradually to a surreal dimension where a 'fly' becomes the symbol of post-Wall thawing. Adopting a microscopic perspective which merges realistic and metaphoric language ('it deals in threat/ and sings in filth'), Szirtes uses the fly to defamiliarise the scenario:

*The language starts to ache
and slowly crumbles.*

*If rain talks it talks nonsense. We lie beside
each other on the bed and think of all
who lie there listening.
bodies and bodies and the rain outside.
the small intimate whispers of the wall.
The loud fly's translucent wing (50).*

⁴²⁵ 'Bridge Passages' is the collection's title sequence, divided into six different sections. The sequence does not include the opening and the final poems ('Night Ferry', 'Recording', and 'Two Rondeaux'), Szirtes' translations of Otto Orbán and Ágnes Nemes Nagy and the sequence called 'Appropriations'. Only 'Night Ferry' and two poems of the title sequence were not included in *The Budapest File*.

Quite exceptionally in ‘Rain’, the voice-over cannot be surely attributed to Szirtes’ reporter, partly because of the italics, which typically indicate other speakers than his persona,⁴²⁶ partly because of the almost unique use of the first-person plural pronoun, which, unlike the third-person plural (or the self-reflexive ‘you’ of ‘Bridge Passage’), does not stress the reporter’s outsider stance but makes him one of ‘them’. This shift is worth remarking since it exposes Szirtes’ scepticism as an integral element of his closeness to, rather than estrangement from, the Eastern European feel. Ghosts and undecipherable ‘screens’ are the projection of a stranger who nonetheless attempts to dialogue with the Other.

Due to Szirtes’ gradual reappropriation of the Hungarian language and cultural legacy, this dialogue is often literary grounded and, in contrast with the other poets considered in the present survey, it displays Szirtes’ distinctive debt to contemporary Hungarian literature. Szirtes’ stress on the historical ‘density’ conveyed by the great voices of mid-century poetry in ‘Learning from Brezhnev’ is not surprising. However, Szirtes has typically challenged the ideologies which underpinned those voices’ success in the West. Talking about his favourite Hungarian poets, Sándor Weöres and Ágnes Nemes Nagy, he underlines how both eschewed the overt political commitment which other famous ‘Easterners’ pursued during the Cold War, whether in the form of direct (Miłosz) or mediated (Holub) dissent:

Neither [was] particularly political in outlook or subject-matter [...] but both were banned for a while by the Stalinist government. Weöres seemed to float above it all but wrote some quite hard-hitting albeit indirect poems in which the regime could readily be identified. Nemes Nagy distilled her deep resentment of the cultural censorship of the regime into poems about nature and other forces.⁴²⁷

Neither Weöres nor Nemes Nagy became icons of anti-communist resistance and neither were, unlike their mutual friend Pilinszki, ‘co-opted’ by the Western intelligentsia which even in the

⁴²⁶As seen in both *Metro* (ch. 1, pp. 50-53) and ‘Austerlitz’, Szirtes uses italics to signal his speaker’s real or imagined dialogue with other voices. The same technique is used in *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape* and the retrospective sequences in *Reel*, where the voices of Szirtes’ parents interweave with the speaker’s.

⁴²⁷ Personal e-mail to the author. Published on Szirtes’ website and available at: <http://www.george.szirtes.co.uk/blog/Weöres.html> [10 July 2007].

Anglosphere coordinated specific politics of translation.⁴²⁸ Probably to make up for this partial indifference, Szirtes committed himself very early to rehabilitating them, including their voices in his collections. Nemes Nagy's voice, in fact, closes *Bridge Passages* providing an intimate, lyrical counterpoint to the public matter of the collection: the 'everyday news of bridges, trees and grass' which 'In a Strong Light' provide an antidote against political delusion is a fit description of Nagy's poetry. In the same collection, an elegy to Sándor Weöres (58-59) confirms the younger poet's admiration for the 'father' of modern Hungarian poetry.

Szirtes' literary sympathies testify to his rejection of the post-Wall 'fable of liberation' of Eastern Europe. Rather significantly, Szirtes' (in many ways unexpected) swerving towards the 'non-political' strain of Hungarian poetry is mostly evident in his choice of a third poet, Otto Orbán, whose 'disengaged' voice sets the tone for *Bridge Passages*.⁴²⁹ It is actually from Orbán that Szirtes borrows the groundtone of the collection, where the Hungarian people, now shorn of directions and deprived of their 'leaders' (the father-figure addressed in Orbán's poems) seem hardly interested in relocating themselves in the new present as well as in their retrieved past. Besides, Orbán's voice is introduced to provide an anti-ideological background to Szirtes' subject-matter. In the group of poems translated by Szirtes and inserted in *Bridge Passages*, there is one about Cold War Hungary, 'Wichtfinder General' (*Bridge Passages* 25), where Orbán foregrounds indifference rather than commitment to historical consciousness, and effectively contrasts it with the progressive notion of History which originated in the Enlightenment and in the romantic legacy of European civilisation. Ghosts, in fact, intrude into the poem. The long season of revolutions 'from below' is grotesquely condensed in the image of Rousseau opening a sort of Pandora's box to release the ghosts of Western (both West- and East-European) modern

⁴²⁸ Sándor Weöres (1913-89) is regarded as the major Hungarian poet after Pilinsky but, unlike Pilinsky's, his work hardly crossed the Curtain during the Cold War years. In their introduction to *The Colonnade of Teeth*, Szirtes and Gőmori underline the ability of this poet to 'float above politics, subsuming politics of tyranny in myths and ingenious play-acting' (18); Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922-1993) formally silenced by the regime in the fifties, is one of the major lyrical voices of the twentieth-century Hungarian scene; a selection of her poems is in the *Colonnade of Teeth* (pp.128-35) and in Weissbort's *Poetry of Survival* (pp. 207-8), whereas a selection from Weöres is also in *Colonnade of Teeth* (pp. 85-100)

⁴²⁹ A sequence of seven poems from Orbán occupies the middle section of *Bridge Passages*, though Szirtes chose not to republish it in *Budapest File*. See *Bridge Passages*, pp. 20-6.

and contemporary age: this vision conflates quite ambivalently the supposedly ‘good revolutions’ with the different terrors of ‘Robespierre and Hitler’. At the end, Rousseau

beats this vale of tears to a bloody pulp of millions of victims,
[.]

By the time he gets home late at night, history is
exhausted
and bored of the bloodbath at Vandée and Katyn Forest;
It longs for a bit of home-cooking and TV in front of the fire...

Originally directed at a still divided Europe, Orbán’s mocking downplay of History is ingeniously re-framed by Szirtes within the post-Wall atmosphere of post-1989 Europe (when episodes like the massacre of Katyn were no longer taboo). Szirtes’ inclusion of ‘Wichtfinder General’ is instructive: it shows that, if Szirtes’ poetry addresses ‘the historical transformations of 1989 tangentially’,⁴³⁰ *Bridge Passages* offers indirection and slant perspectives on history in order to grasp not only the mood of the post-ideological age but a radical lack of faith in what is to come. The objective is not so much to distrust Hungary’s return to democracy but to question the accountability of ‘Europe’s lingua franca/ of luminous directions, boundaries’ (30).

By absorbing Orbán’s bathetic attitude and his strains of ‘afflatus and deflation’,⁴³¹ Szirtes also tries his hand at the antiphrastic lexicon of the ‘politicised’ voices of mid-century dissidence, the language which in Cold War Eastern Europe used to translate inner dissent with official politics (‘inner emigration’). Szirtes is openly suspicious of the rapid consensus gained by the ‘return to the West’, which is seen as the adherence to a world where individual material welfare is a primary concern. Consequently, ambivalence veins the parabolic style and grotesque transfiguration used in poems like ‘The Flies’, where the ‘blind field’ behind the poem brings an apparently removed but recent past into light again, thus underlining a continuity with, rather than the departure from, the Cold War age. In ‘The Flies’ in particular, the Cold War lexicon (coldness, the presence of ‘flies’, the season of ‘thawing’/spring) is wittily handled: being no

⁴³⁰ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p.90.

⁴³¹ Szirtes, ‘Introduction’ to Otto Orbán, *The Blood of the Walsungs: Selected Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 11.

longer intruders, the flies are those who re-tailor their 'needs' to what the age demands in the transition between pre- and post-Wall world. Seamlessly inserted in the speaker/reporter's meditation on changes, the parable of the fly lets elements of disorder surface under the appearance of the new, benign age of post-communism ('a warm rain'):

Forgive this garrulousness. As I write
 a fat black fly crawls up the windowpane.
 He feels the winter's over. Spring
 anticipates itself and sets alight
 worn patches of grass. The promise of warm rain
 is like veins on a fly's wing.

And now a fly drops past the radiator.
 The time is wrong for him. He scrambles up
 fizzing furiously, leans
 against the grass, revving his motor,
 then into gear and upwards. He can't stop
 and think. [...]

Look far enough, the human flies emerge...
 I can't maintain this game of telescopes,
 having never been a god
 or sportsman though the hunting urge
 lives in me too. I know the black fly gropes
 towards his notion of the good,

his personal heap, however much it stinks;
 that being here is an aesthetic choice
 for those who have it, and for now
 we are among this few. What the wall thinks
 is my concern. We give the wall a voice...(7)

The speaker in 'The Flies' is clearly an outsider: his awareness that freedom, even the freedom of being a witness, is 'an aesthetic choice/for those who have it' echoes his realisation in 'Nachtmusik' that 'to act,/ to make things happen, to make choices/ are all conditions of the beautiful and the exact' (*Bridge Passages* 27). The very conquest of freedom (the freedom to choose) is somehow regarded as delusive and language is indirectly seen as a vehicle of this delusion.

On the other hand, Szirtes' indirect handling of the political register constructs his reporter as an 'insider', who presents his audience with a half-known code to crack. Language fits then Szirtes' peculiar kind of 'double-exposure'. An enduring symbol of division, the 'wall' contains a cluster of meanings: if in 'A Game of Statues' the 'continual nightmare/ of the wall' (42) is indicative of a well-rooted fear of oppression, the wall becomes here a metaphor of the people's still paralysed will, and of their possible misunderstanding of choice ('we give the wall a voice'). Moreover, the transition to a new, supposedly post-ideological age, is cast in terms which in fact revive the Cold War ideology, suggesting a new ('cross-curtain', democratic and capitalistic) version of the 'old' degradation and corruption. A harbinger of the advent of sheer materialism, the black fly actually pursues a 'notion of happiness' which the poem further qualifies as merely individualistic and limited, thus hardly preferable to the 'dictatorship over needs'. In order to dissent from such notion, the speaker explores parabolic language:

The cut worm forgives the plough

and to the fly the plough is the cold wind
brewing beyond the Buda hills, the frost
making a belated entrance.
It's not the business of weather to be kind
nor to the market visitor to count the cost
of gypsies and peasants... (7-8)

The cost of gypsies and peasants – two of the groups which were marginalised by both the pre- and the post-1989 age – is not only the cost of the much awaited integration into a new political-economic system. Szirtes' words actually key into another aspect of Hungarian and Central-Eastern European history which marked the ambivalent political disruptions of the post-Wall age: the rebirth of ethnic division. Szirtes' concern with the 'negative' side of Eastern multi-culturalism actually runs throughout the collection and is clearly grounded on his personal and family history:

When I went back to Hungary for the first time Budapest was the most intense
experience I'd had in my life I think, and it was going to have to filter back.
And when it began to filter back, it began to filter out in these longer poems,

because the material was more narrative in some ways, and because there were shadows behind shadows and levels behind levels.⁴³²

The writer's impulse to unravel the past and the emigrant's need to return to his native country permeate Szirtes' remarks, which link up with the concern with the 'floaters' of history defined in his introduction to *Budapest File* and reveal Szirtes' apprehension of the European experience of ethnic division. The floaters in Szirtes are also those who live between different times and it is by tracking their lives that Szirtes brings the East back to the West. Ghosts become less 'exotic', and draw uncomfortably close in the historical memory shared by the former halves of Europe: Szirtes' double vision of Eastern Europe include thus 'a multitude of pasts, remnants of the past visible not only in the city's architectural heritage but also hidden beneath the city barren places'.

The tension between 'invisible' and 'visible' worlds accounts for Szirtes' ghastly rendering of places and for the 'transmigrations' which surface throughout his work. The exilic condition described in 'Border Crossing' as a 'passing/ to other gravities' (*Budapest File*, 113) becomes in *Bridge Passages* the intuition of other, possible lives. In 'In a Strong Light' (15), Szirtes uses *ekphrasis* to describe an evanescent, feminine character which is almost the poet's *doppelgänger*. The poem is structured upon a tension between self and Other, where the latter seems the repository of a sort of genetic memory of pain:

All the harmony is gone,
but something leaps where shadows throw
their careless and flat members. Your body is warm
and slopes so gently. Hands have narrowed it
to wrists and ankles, formed the bolder
curvatures of your temple and your arm,
explored your ears, lovingly parodied
your brittle collarbone and shoulder.

To snap out of the body, find it stiff
or burned or crippled, to become objective
as sun or water are, will not
completely cancel out a world (15-6)

⁴³² George Szirtes, 'Interview with John Tusa', *The John Tusa Interviews*, BBC Radio 3; transcript available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/szirtes.html> [4 sept. 2008]

The object of an unrevealed tragic past, ‘you’, is not defined, and lexical indeterminacies (‘something’, ‘shadows’, and the traces of a ‘dismembered’ body) add to Szirtes’ belief in the inability of words to account for reality. Though responding to the general sense of amnesia which permeates *Bridge Passages*, the poem hints however to another kind of impenetrability. It is actually a post-mortem portrait of his mother, a tribute which reveals Szirtes’ deep-seated anxieties over the return of the past. His attempt to describe his mother by ‘narrowing her to wrists and ankles’ proves useless: Szirtes’ mother thwarts the son’s effort to ‘frame’ her within the poem. Her tragic past is ‘rightly hers’, and other poems in *Bridge Passages* betray the fear that that past might have been cancelled by either suppression or willing removal.

The dissolution of the present moment becomes actually relevant to the intimate fragmentation brought about by the tragic events of mid-century and inextricable from the lives of those who survived. Szirtes’ address to the ‘floaters’ covers his retrospective concern with the irremediably transient situation of those who are dispossessed of their history and stories, and therefore embody the ‘negative’ side of that fluid dimension ascribed to Central-Eastern European peoples. This fear is never so palpable as in Szirtes’ oblique approach to the highly elliptic and fleeting figure of his mother. A Romanian-Hungarian woman of probable Jewish ascent whose story is first sketched in the sequence ‘Metro’,⁴³³ Magdalena Szirtes becomes the representative of floaters heavily tried by mid-century crimes: a survivor of labour camps, she lost almost all her family there, and eventually committed suicide in England after a whole life spent there trying to start anew.⁴³⁴ Through her story, half-narrated half-glimpsed, Szirtes lends his voice to the displaced and the deterritorialised, those who cannot belong anywhere; at the same time, Magdalena, a photographer for all her life, is clearly the figure who inspires Szirtes’ conception of poetry as ‘photography’, enabling him to reproduce those half-shadows where its protagonists, and Magdalena in the first place, move. Hers is the ‘blind field’ which opens behind her son’s poetry.

⁴³³ ‘Metro’ [1988] is included in *The Budapest File* (43-74).

⁴³⁴ George Szirtes, ‘My Jewish Budapest’ *Hungarian Quarterly*, vol. XLI 158 (2000), available at <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no158.html>.

This identification emerges from Szirtes' both indirect and direct commitment to his mother's past. In a poem published after *Bridge Passages*, 'Transylvania', Szirtes tried, for instance, to include a wider picture of the past revolutions by shifting his focus to the haunted and disputed lands of Transylvania, from where his mother came. Though present staleness and apathy characterise his depiction of Romania, 'the sense of paralysis' detected by Anne Stevenson⁴³⁵ in the poem owes much to the haunting presence of the repressed past as well: the merging of lyrical efforts and narrative line tries to evoke a different kind of possession from that used in 'Metro'.

'Transylvania' shows an obvious preoccupation with lands apparently removed from history: the focus is placed in this case on the 'floaters' of a land disputed between Romania and Hungary, deeply affected by the Second World War and Nazi round-ups, and later returned alternatively to Hungary and Romania. The poem starts from the descent into Hades which is a *topos* of Szirtes' poetry; here, in particular, the classic resonance is implicit in the appearance of 'Virgil', the only survivor of Magdalena Szirtes' family in Transylvania who becomes the traveller/Szirtes' guide. The infernal depiction of Romania thus takes up a twofold meaning: on the one hand, there is the crisis of post-Wall Transylvania, its present stasis; on the other hand, there is the country's past, glimpsed through the sudden 'temporal' disturbances which take place at the beginning of the poem.

Before meeting Virgil, the poet is actually portrayed while embarking on a journey towards 'somewhere' which is also a journey across his mother's past evoked, like in a section of *Photographer in Winter* (4-7), through idyllic images of icy hills, winter skating, landscapes which seem distant from the loud noise of history:

We're here to look for something, perhaps a house
buried half in the hill, with damp walls,
a jutting terrace and a long view across

the park to an artificial lake. Snow falls
on the branches and a surface of sheer ice
where a mob of skaters wheel and weave white petals

⁴³⁵ Anne Stevenson, 'Grudging Lyrical Earth', *Poetry Review* 86:3 (1996), 70.

frilled with crystals, Transylvanian lace.
 My mother's home town. The trees are thick with green.
 Summer. Somewhere, in another place,
 the skaters move to a frozen music...(154)

As usual, Szirtes translates his 'sense of disorientating dislocation'⁴³⁶ into photographic frames and spare metaphorical flights: Romania's natural landscape is a half-buried meander, whose indeterminate geometry suggests an indeterminate temporal frame and, in the diary entry which opens the sequence, both lets in and excludes the speaker from frames of Magdalena's past. Soon, however, the landscape changes and 'we' are inside the present. Virgil appears as the reporter strikes a grave, mourning note:

Our Virgil is thin. He waves a red carnation
 in his outstretched hand. His mouth is sad.
 Urine and darkness. [...]

Virgil's wife is not long dead. He hankers
 after her. Hence the obsessive tidiness.
 Hence the old clothes queuing up on hangers,

a line of ghost wives, each in a different dress.
 Hence the suitcases of old shoes, dead soles,
 dead arches, metaphors of emptiness.

Waste not, want not. Words. Each word controls
 a complex microsystem full of shoes (155).

The atmosphere of staleness, misery and drabness is transferred from Virgil's demeanour to a general atmosphere: 'small heaps/ of rubble wait for houses never built' while people arrive at individual outstations and make their peace/ with consciences, authorities'.

Apart from the legacy of communism, however, Szirtes' objective captures the material difficulty of cohabitation experienced by different peoples who share a common past of deprivation and terror. As happens in the Budapest of 'A Game of Statues', people in Cluj (Kolozsvar) look like 'ghosts': '*ghosts stand in queues/ at holes. Ghosts bandy words/ behind the counter,*' says the diary entry which closes the poem (158). Emotional and material staleness

⁴³⁶ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 95.

turns out to be a sort of post-traumatic inertia. Control in Virgil's life (replicated by the formal control of Szirtes' *terza rima*, one of his favourite forms and fitting the 'dantesque' evocation of a journey across time) is revealed as a cover-up for instabilities that inhere in the immediate political situation and in Transylvania's difficult history of multi-cultural cohabitation:

Panels drop. The lift is stuck. This is a rich
country. It has silver, gold and bauxite,
natural gas, a seaboard. It can afford a hitch

or two, a twenty-watt bulb on a inter night,
a telephone exchange like a starved behemoth
straddling an unlit street. Basically it's all right:

You can have people or food but not both... (157)

When soldier meets driver he makes a proposition.
when driver meets soldier he makes a contribution
thereby maintaining both in honest apposition.

Two old men meet. They shake hands. One has lost
a leg. Friends of different tribes, they speak
the ruling language (158).

Defined by Szirtes as a 'photo-journalistic poem',⁴³⁷ 'Transylvana' displays a tension between the outsider's need to document the present of Transylvania and his impulse to be absorbed by its reemerging past: episodes are typically half-sketched, so that the city's haunting past can only be inferred (the war where a man lost his leg, the regime which makes people work and live in need, the territorial wars of tribe against tribe are beyond the actual scope of the poem). Amongst the dead who 'drive dangerously among the living', Szirtes' more pervasive doppelgänger, the elusive 'you' of 'In a Strong Light' is only in the background, but her oblique presence determines the 'blind field' of the poem.

Some passages of 'Transylvana' are almost grotesque in the montage technique Szirtes adopts to superpose the present and the past. Though the 'obliquely political' scope of *Bridge Passages* does not directly involve the pervading presence of Magdalena in the present time, she is

⁴³⁷ Qtd. in Hugh Macpherson, 'Hungary and History' (review of *The Budapest File*), *Poetry Review* 91:2 (2001), 101-3, p.102.

introduced unexpectedly and therefore more effectively by montage. In *Bridge Passages* too, in fact, Szirtes slips in fleeting images of his mother and, more poignantly, the return from the Nazi camps which is narrated in 'Metro'. In the mid-eighties sequence, the desire to represent facts, however intangible, often resulted in hasty, cumulative evocation, as if her tragic past could only be mentioned and rapidly dropped: 'inevitably, labour camps. How many perished here // [...] Escapades, adventures, tragedies, the company/ reduced, disbanded then recalled.// The dark-eyed girl in February, back home' (*Budapest File* 58). In *Bridge Passages*, a solution to the inability for language to relate that past is offered by the surreal superposition of past and present, which rearticulates the temporal convolution of *Metro*. No less than in *Metro*, the past of the Jews and of their mid-century tragedy in Hungary 'drives dangerously amongst the living', but Szirtes chooses to condense it in suspended and arresting images. In 'Burning Stubble at Szigliget', the present moment is abruptly transfigured, and becomes past in a startling surreal touch which reminds the reader of Sebald's style in *A Natural History of Destruction*:

The statues held their poses even though
no one was there to see them, lost
in dark and dark grey, minding their own affairs.
The alien world lay immediately below,
and waited patient at its post.

Deep alizarin crimson, bleeding down
to ochre, orange, yellow. Spectacular
colours and a crackling rain
which wasn't rain but something overthrown.
The light was falling like the morning star:

tractors like tanks appeared
and crushed the street to crisp white flour.
A woman was kicking a corpse. The thin grey curtains
of smoke trembled and behind them cleared
a space for buildings and a shower

of broken stucco... (54-5)

'Burning Stubble at Szigliget' resumes the ambivalent imagery of other poems, from the Cold War metaphors (the rain, the curtain deflated into smoke) to the theme of architectural

‘convolution’ (the façades, the stuccoes, the slant of light which reminds of the ‘moral fall of stairs and lift-shafts’ in ‘Drawing the Curtain’). At the same time, Szirtes’ photographic talent for ‘flawed’ epiphany meets his talent as a painter and his ekphrastic method: ‘[Szirtes’] images rely not so much on metonymic increments but on developing levels (hence offering the implication of a narrative progression) that allow the conception of a meaning, the penetration of surfaces as an analogy [...] for the representational process’.⁴³⁸ Although the statues, the rain, and the curtain of smoke underline the otherness of the cityscape, the speaker does, in fact, move beyond the city’s impenetrable surfaces. The invasion of the garden by ghosts becomes evident: the ‘unattributable’ image of a woman kicking a corpse, ‘unattributable’, flows unexpectedly into that fluid world which is glimpsed beneath the frozen images.

It is only by letting the past leak into the present, that Szirtes subtly lets the all-pervading figure of his past, his mother, suddenly appears. In ‘A Game of Statues’, Magdalena is the ‘she’ who returns from the ‘black hole’ from which the disorder of her life sprang and which finally crushed her:

Time replies
with memory. She mounts a ruined staircase
through heaps of rubble. She has come
back from the camps and wagons to surprise
the world. each broken window wears her face,
her footsteps are a muffled drum.

She knows what she has to do. No need for food,
Affection is the cure: the street’s hot breath
On neck and earlobe, words and sighs. [...]

Across the ruffled pond
birds are frozen into screams
of joy. A single, vaguely comatose
statue holds real flowers in her hand.
The flowers are dying as she dreams (41-2).

Szirtes relinquishes here the objectivity and the detachment of the reporter. In ‘A Game of Statues’, the return of the past is startling as the figure of the mother intrudes upon the objective

⁴³⁸ Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, p. 71.

quite unexpectedly. Thus Szirtes salvages Magdalena's story from the ravages of history, from the lingua franca of Hungarian rebirth and the fear of general amnesia. The narrative-lyrical note on which the poem ends matches the gravity of the former sequence, but momentarily disentangles poetry and words from the silence which Szirtes importantly recognises as the 'voice' of Eastern Europe.

V.4 Crossing borders in Ken Smith's *The Heart, the Border and Wild Root*

Szirtes' poetry strives after meaning by means of approximations and nearly missed epiphanies, thus investigating the constant chasm between the dimension of the present moment and the dimension of perception and memory. Instead, 'reality in its massive, tangible, and terrifying concreteness',⁴³⁹ bare facts break through Ken Smith's poetry, where a kind of double vision captures the burdensome past of Eastern Europe alongside the turmoil which affected it between the mid-eighties and the noughts. Eastern 'disorder' is fully exposed, but so are the ghosts and the potentially subversive historical visions harboured by peoples in the 'other half' of Europe. Rightly called the most 'European' voice on the British literary scene,⁴⁴⁰ Smith was able to tune in to the undersong of a new age; what is more, his perspective was wide enough to preserve a Central-Eastern European dimension when areas like the Balkans and the Ukraine were being pushed aside, out of 'civilised' Europe and of the rest of 'integrated' regions and beyond the new boundaries forged by 1989.

Smith is also a poet whose self is 'inhabited by other selves', and his early poetry is literally haunted by voices from the past.⁴⁴¹ His urgency to lend his voice to the voiceless is deeply tied with his reflection on the polyphonic constitution of poetry. A poet rooted in the Anglo-Saxon language and rhythmic tradition, Smith often appeals to classic texts such as the elegy 'The Wanderer' to underline the value of poetic polyphony and the need he felt to preserve it by rejecting the increasingly fashionable monodic mode of British poetry:

⁴³⁹ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, p.80.

⁴⁴⁰ Anna Wigley, 'Suleyman in Europe', *Poetry Review* 91:2 (2001), 35-6.

⁴⁴¹ See 'Reaching through to Kate', *You Again*, pp. 124-8.

If you look at ‘The Wanderer’ there’s at least four voices in there [...] What I like in the poem is the fact that voices drift in and drift out [...] To me, that’s part of the world we’ve lost. We’ve lost that collective gathering of voices [...], that collective unconscious, if you like, out of which this voice rises and falls. Bakunin: ‘waves of the sea’. To me, that’s the republic of voices and identities and people.⁴⁴²

Smith’s struggle against a loss of history, which is also the loss of ‘voices’, is ingrained in his poetry. So is his need to feel plugged to different historical configurations, disruptions and continuities: the ‘synchronization’ between Western and Eastern European voices which Holub also urged is actually paramount in the Yorkshire poet. A left-wing, if anarchic, writer, Smith tries to put together an ‘International of voices’ by focusing on the ‘other side of history’ tucked in the ripples and deviations of Eastern Europe.

Smith listened long to East-European voices and, from a Western viewpoint, tried to reverse the opposition between the former East and West by focusing on Eastern European historical consciousness: in his poetry, losses of yesteryear intertwine with present losses, borderlands are spaces where the interlayering of histories may result in their reciprocal silencing, and individual lives are rescued from the possibility that history might really end with a whimper. All these concerns surface especially in Smith’s later poems, from *The Heart, the Border* to the ‘Eastern’ sections of *Tender to the Queen of Spain* and *Wild Root*; these collections also testify to Smith’s problematic engagement with the representation of the Other, by displaying a variety of modalities which merge narrative with photographic reportage, the ‘chronicle’ with the journal and the dramatic monologue.⁴⁴³

Smith might be regarded as the last ‘voice of history’ on the late twentieth-century British poetic scene. In his work, socio-political protest and concern with the past are closely intertwined, even when his focus moves from the English background with which he was initially associated. The new focus emerges quite plainly in *The Heart, the Border*: whereas the

⁴⁴² Unpublished section of the Bloodaxe Books catalogue interview, qtd. in Raw, p.112.

⁴⁴³ On Smith’s use of *genres* and intergeneric forms, and on the possible influence of English poets (Jon Silkin), American (the ‘deep-image’ poets Robert Bly and James Wright) and Spanish poets (Antonio Machado and Garcia Lorca) on his work, see Wainwright, ‘‘With a dewdrop on his nose’’: A piece on the poetry of Ken Smith’, *Stand* 6:1, 18-26, and Raw, ‘Best, Ken’, pp. 101-10.

collection signalled a climax in the ‘protest poetry’ of the eighties, it also signalled the poet’s partial departure from ‘things English’ and might have consequently resulted in political disengagement. Unlike Harrison, Smith never embraced militant positions against the war in former Yugoslavia or in the Middle East and was extremely loath to commit himself to a cause ‘by proxy’. Yet his excavation in the present and past of Eastern Europe, which contributed to broaden the political scope of British letters, sprang directly from his sensitivity as a Northern voice. Francis Doerr provides a significant introduction to Smith’s attitude:

Having been buried, disinterred, reburied, exhumed again, [...] the body of time we think of as history has been scored with a series of intersections [...] Smith seemed to continually disinter the past only to introduce it to an unseen aspect of itself in the present. In so doing, he created borders between historical eras, new in-between spaces he then inhabited and from which he wrote.⁴⁴⁴

The geopolitical borders of Central-Eastern Europe stimulated Smith’s political insight: those regions posed irresolvable questions to a Western world where dynamics of marginalisation of people and their stories seemed clear (as clear, for instance, as the subjugation of Yorkshire to Southern England which directly affected Smith). Whereas Szirtes represents Eastern opacity through images of layers, Smith prefers to spatialise it through the image of borders: ‘I love you/ from the collapsing country/ across the shifting borders’, says the speaker in ‘Heaven’s Dust’ (*Wild Root* 283), singing a ‘song’ for Hungary in a distinctive, epistolary tone. Far from being merely geographical points of reference or metaphors for dynamics of enclosure and opening, in Smith’s poetry borders retain, as Doerr suggests, a peculiar value as ‘palimpsests’.⁴⁴⁵ It is through spaces and through times, through gaps revealing unpredictable interferences between the past and the present, that Smith turns his ‘double-vision’ of past and present into a kind of poetic-journalistic investigation. No less than in Szirtes, the prominence of narrative links over ‘photographic framing’ is the result of a radical poetic re-orientation.

The poet’s gradual distancing from history seen as unconsumed experience is emphasised by his stylistic choices. In *The Heart, the Border*, part of Smith’s attention is still devoted to well-

⁴⁴⁴ Doerr, ‘Likely through the stones’, p. 33.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

known, emblematic sites of memory. In contrast with Harrison's appropriating vision, however, Smith renders the shock of the traveller confronted with places of memory which suddenly re-emerged to the Western historical consciousness. In the poems about Poland which make up the *coda* to *The Heart, the Border*, the very role of the observer is questioned in a way that makes clear Smith's guarded approach to past tragedies. In 'The Magic of Poland' sequence (51-54), Smith engages in a short journey through the neighbourhoods of Krakow and Nova Huta. As elsewhere in the 'Eastern section', the opaqueness of Eastern cityscapes is foregrounded. Initially, a few tokens of Poland's history intrude casually upon Smith's objective:

Take a long tour of the monuments:
these are to all the many years the ravens ate
the long depredations of the wolf, the bear,
the arrival of the Adam Smith institute.

I write you, love, from Nova Huta,
from Kraków the soured beauty, another night
at the Palace of Culture I'll get weepily drunk
for you and for the magic of Poland. *Na Zdrowie*. (51)

Smith's apparently light-hearted tone is, however, demystified as the sequence progresses to its deadpan climax. The poet's objective registers a sense of genuine helplessness as it moves out of Poland's major conurbation and glides over *Oświęcim*. Here, Smith's barren language points to the very vacuum history secreted not so long ago:

Farms and unfenced fields,
villages, chained cattle,
turkeys, road signs
reading Muzeum Oświęcim:

Auschwitz-Birkenau.
Flat grey earth.
Pits, drains, factories.
The machineries of death.

Work will make you free,
Anna Sophia from Hamburg,
Jelena from Kraków,
tenants of the Ghetto Nuovo.

So close, far away as the moon,
as all the lives all the dead lived.

An offshoot of the rail,
tracks ending in grass, chimneys,
a tangle of old wire,
a pond of white human ash. (53)

The impersonal rendering of landscape reproduces non-emphatically the *Nachgeborene*'s encounter with residual past. Though quite at odds with the sprawling lines typical of Smith's work, formal restraint is not, *per se*, the distinctive feature of this short reportage: Smith's paratactic and cumulative phrasing often hovers between the 'muscular' eloquence Jeffrey Wainwright detects in his early poems and the bare, essential notes of later sequences like *Fox Running*.⁴⁴⁶ However, the slow tempo and the suspensions of 'The Magic of Poland' are suggestively played off against the hectic groundtone of *The Heart, the Border*. Parataxis results in a succession of verbless sentences which fracture the canonical bird's-eye view on 'Auschwitz': camera panning progresses from the nondescript, panoramic view of fields to the zooming-in on the railway tracks and the pond. Contrasted with the rapid evocation of Krakow and Nova Huta, the evocation of 'farms and unfenced fields [...] pits, drains, factories' is indeterminate enough to define any kind of industrial landscape: Smith does not dwell on the 'monstrous' appearance of Auschwitz, and obliquely stresses the 'industrially minded' dynamics of extermination by evoking the 'machineries of death'.

Though dialoguing with stereotypical, disembodied visions of the place, Smith's factual observation is turned to powerful effect by the poem's close and by the poem which immediately follows. Placed at the end of the photographic sequence, the pond of ashes outside Birkenau is almost surreal; 'white' rather than dark, this obscenely 'natural' element becomes a synecdoche of the atrocities accomplished in the nearby building. Atrocity is then addressed with remarkable restraint in the next poem, where Oświęcim, an utterly problematic place of memory, becomes the object of Smith's camera: the series of objects on display in the museum are mentioned

⁴⁴⁶ Jeffrey Wainwright, 'Letter to Ken Smith', qtd. in Raw, 'Best, Ken', p. 97.

unemotionally, as if to underline the atrocious dumbness of what remains – of a story which can, in fact, be only inadequately recorded:

Time stops here.
And I am not in it. These chipped bowls,
piles of clipped hair, tangle of spectacles
are here for no one.
Beyond this moment nothing ever changes
but the yellow light across the fields,
bleached in the snapshot, fading out, the corner
of the picture turning inward where it burns (54)

The speaker is not simply a visitor of the ‘Muzeum Oświęcim’: the objects he lists ‘are there for no one’, and their muteness measures his distrust of any kind of illusory empathy. It is like the muteness of stones placed at the borders between different territories: the visitor might capture in them ‘nothing of our meanings but that they outlast us’⁴⁴⁷, but this realisation leads here out of time.

The tragedy of the Holocaust and the silence of history resonate through other poems in Smith’s wide tribute to Eastern Europe. Yet precisely because Smith seems perfectly aware of the possible impotence of poetry, he challenges muteness and prefers instead to lend his voice to different, disparate ‘cries of hope’. Typically, voices penetrate Smith’s poems *ex abrupto*, as if the wanderer’s interlocutors did by turns irrupt in the loose narrative thread spun by lyric ‘I’ throughout his journal.⁴⁴⁸ Some of these voices belonged to the conventional landscape of Eastern Europe with its fleeting directions, a nondescript dimension where the pressure of History emerges in scraps. Voices impressed him in their ‘broken accents’, which apparently released ‘the fragments of a song, the song that is highlighted in the memory because it is no longer possible to sing it.’⁴⁴⁹ This obtrusion is, however, deeply contrived. Though admittedly

⁴⁴⁷ ‘The Stone Poems’, p. 24.

⁴⁴⁸ As underlined in ‘Swag-bag of a Word thief’ (*You Again*, pp. 92-3), Smith used to travel with a microphone and later transcribe and re-elaborate anecdotes and interviews. If this might account for the immediacy and ‘spontaneous’ quality of much of Smith’s poetic journal, it also stresses the importance of voice and personal disclosure in it.

⁴⁴⁹ Qtd. in Raw, ‘The Godfather of the New Poetry’, p. 143.

Smith's 'methods are serendipity',⁴⁵⁰ his careful choice of *scenarios* reveals a consciously political remapping of Central and Eastern Europe.

Years after the 'Serbian Letters', when the Balkans were already regarded as an anomalous excrescence in Europe,⁴⁵¹ or its latter-day Ruritania, Smith stumbled into the half-stifled voices of war victims. As happens in 'The Magic of Poland', Smith's treatment of the Yugoslavian tragedy is guarded, yet outspoken. Only a bunch of poems survive of Smith's short but shocking experience of the Bosnian-Serbian conflict, which brought him back from the Northern territories of Serbia to Sarajevo between 1994 and 1995. At times, Smith approaches the state of emergency into which the Serb-Croat communities plunged with Fenton's baffling indirection, as happens in 'Essential Serbo-Croat' (*Shed*, 192) where the need for help is translated into a first aid primer:

Vrti mi se u glavi	I feel dizzy
Zlo mi je	I feel sick
Slabo mi je	I feel weak
Nije dobro	It's no good
Izgubio sam sve	I have lost everything
Ne mogu vam pomoći	I can't help you.

More often, however, Smith drops indirection and lends his voice to the protagonists of the conflict, people on the border between warring states, whose ethnic belonging has to be inferred. It is actually not soldiers but refugees and emigrants who haunt his poems, 'telling their tales' in a landscape of already shifting borders.

So, in a section of *Wild Root* called 'Hungarian Quartet', a lyrical excursus on the lives of the Roma people ('Sandór the poet', *Shed* 264-5) is followed by abortive 'songs' where fractured sentences translate not so much the recorder's shocked attitude to what he learns, but his effort to render, in translation, the stories which lie behind forced exiles. In a poem written while Smith crossed the border between Serbia and Hungary, 'Misi's song', the atmosphere edged with

⁴⁵⁰ Smith, 'Swag-bag of a Word thief', p. 93.

⁴⁵¹ See Garton Ash, 'Cry, the Dismembered Country', *History of the Present*, pp. 354-375.

menace is made pungent by the bitter, solitary and non-identified voice of a man from Novi Sad, Vojvodina:

I will sing one song
from Novi Sad. But this
is not a song.

Two words: difficult, different.
I can't remember: la la la.
Oh my love.

My beloved landscape and the landscape of my beloved.
I was born to it.
I should die there.

Each night the phone rang.
Sometimes silence, breathing. Or a man
cursing in Serbian:

why don't you go?
You have a wife, children,
we can kill them.

You we will impale (*Shed*, 266)

Elliptic though it is, Smith's perspective betrays his in-depth acquaintance with the collateral damage triggered off by the wars of 1991-98 in Vojvodina, a former autonomous province of Yugoslavia, which was for years the theatre of massacres and forced migrations (mostly of Hungarian people).⁴⁵² Facts are laid bare, and Smith's attitude towards the Balkan 'tinderbox' betrays no complacent understanding. Smith's restraint is of course enhanced by allusion. As happens in the twin poem 'Dmitri's song', Smith hardly provides any key of access to 'Misi's' story: the brutality of the word 'impale' is foregrounded, but the dialogic situation the poem implies blunts it. The colloquial frame Smith chooses to tackle Misi's war proves effective, since it defuses any association with 'archaic warfare' on which Western readers might dwell.

⁴⁵² Smith would typically retell the story of 'his' poems in his prose writings and interviews: the story of 'Misi' is retold in Colin Raw, 'The godfather of the new poetry', pp. 137-145.

‘Misi’ belongs to a gallery of figures inspired by the exiled people Smith met on the road. More often, however, it is on the fate of people ‘stuck at borders’ that Smith’s work revolves: voices ‘on the edge’ of different ages and different spaces are variously embedded into the poetic journal across Eastern Europe. Smith’s style responds consistently to the fractured historical consciousness typical of borderlands, and translates it into images where different times seem to be arranged in a non-diachronic way. Especially since 1991, this has been a staple of Western representation of the East. Garton Ash, for instance, famously underlined the shock of the ‘Westerner’ in his wartime reportage about the besieged peoples of Serbia: ‘“In the war...” they say, and you don’t know if we are in the First World War, the Second World War or the most recent war’.⁴⁵³ Yet Eastern disorder – the interleaving of different layers of cultural and historical identification – was widely foreshadowed by writers like Miłosz, for whom the ‘circles’ of history in Eastern Europe are the result of a-chronological, non-deterministic anachronisms, the ‘nonparallelism of historical times’ in a same place.⁴⁵⁴ Conflicts triggered off by 1989 of course substantiated Miłosz’ words: as Ash made clear, this non-parallelism is not exceptional in peoples who experienced the systematic repression of territorial identity, whether national or regional, and thus developed a kind of compression of different, crucial moments in their history. The synchronic rereading of local, regional or national history might thus blur the distinction between the present and the past, history and myth.⁴⁵⁵

In *Tender to the Queen of Spain*, Smith plays precisely on this kind of insight, and tried to fight the stereotypical vision of ‘backward’ Eastern Europe by remoulding his documentary sketches on the uncertainty of historical referents: ‘The Shadow of God’ proves a case in question. Like ‘Hawkwood’, Smith’s parody of historical chronicles inspired by the legendary experiences of a medieval mercenary,⁴⁵⁶ ‘The Shadow of God’ uses the form of a chronicle to

⁴⁵³ Garton Ash, ‘the Serbian Tragedy’, *History of the Present*, pp. 254-271, p.265.

⁴⁵⁴ Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, p. 106.

⁴⁵⁵ Of course, the connection between the rebirth of ‘atavistic’ forms of nationalism across Southern Eastern Europe, and the literary rediscovery of national mythologies in regions like former Yugoslavia, Kosovo or Hungary was a question which involved both the national republics of letters and the international literary scene: when extremists appealed to Vasko Popa, the National Bard of Yugoslavia, Vasko Popa, in order to rekindle old mythologies, the focus on the folkloric aspect of his poetry which Western translators had typically stressed was likewise questioned.

⁴⁵⁶ Originally published in *Terra* (1986), ‘Hawkwood’ was republished in *Shed*, pp. 40-51.

expose history as a palimpsest, as a plurality of voices. A background of battles and endless war is sketched throughout the journal, which revives the emblematic figure of the sixteenth-century warrior-ruler Suleyman to question common representations of the Eastern invasions in the West. Smith often underlined that ‘the Middle Ages never ended’ and ‘The Shadow of God’ reflects this line of thought. Unlike ‘Hawkwood’, the chronicle is actually projected into the present:

To Mohács
 in the marshlands, still in the pouring rain,
 August 29th, 1956, where those summoned
 and hastily gathered died in thousands
 in the space of a moment the chronicles
 scribbles, in the safety of distance,
 cruel panthers in a moment to hell’s pit (270)

In the space of a moment, in the centuries
 moments pile into, leaf over leaf,
 season by season as the winters pass
 and the wars roll over and the borders shift
 it is ploughland, old bones surfacing
 at the hoe’s edge and plough’s iron,
scapulae and *vertebrae* rising in a flat
 wide fenced country laid open to the wind,
 prowled by the tractors of the collectives...(Shed, 271)

The chronicler’s voice subtly adapts the story of Suleyman to a post-Wall background where the memory of battles and occupations plays a central role in the history of identitarian politics. As Anna Wingley suggests, ‘juxtaposed with poems on modern war-torn Europe, [the poem] seems to bridge the gap of four centuries: the fanaticism and barbarity, the pleasure in destruction, are unnervingly close to home.’⁴⁵⁷ The result is, for the chronicler no less than for the poet, the very impossibility to unravel the threads of past histories which flow into the digressive narration.

The photographer and the chronicler are two of Smith’s typical ‘mask voices’,⁴⁵⁸ both of which have from the very beginning signalled a concern with ‘telling’ which counterpoints his complex interlayering of narratives and voices. After *The Heart, the Border* and *Tender to the*

⁴⁵⁷ Wingley, ‘Suleyman in Europe’, p. 36.

⁴⁵⁸ ‘Reaching through to Kate’, p. 124.

Queen of Spain, however, Smith refined this poetic strategy to connect himself to the Eastern European ‘compressed’ historical consciousness and to demystify it ironically. As soon as Smith’s ‘Eastern’ journal in *Wild Root* gathers pace, narratives filtered by masks give way to both narrative and lyrical explorations of borders as spatial/temporal ‘passages’. As already remarked, Smith moves between the lyrical first-person singular pronoun and a more communal first-person plural subject, and in Wainwright’s opinion, ‘it is the switching between the two that is the most distinctive feature for the poet’s later work’.⁴⁵⁹ This tendency indeed increased between the mid-eighties and the late nineties, as though the poet were trying to make up for the gradual loss of socio-political points of reference.⁴⁶⁰ Though this shift in Smith’s poetry is apparent whenever he moves away from England, it is precisely in Eastern Europe that this tendency to use a communal subject achieves a climactic resonance.

A sceptical, ironical communal ‘us’ pervades indeed the ‘Wire through the Heart’ sequence in *Wild Root* (*Shed* 278-286). The sequence was re-published in Hungary and, like the ‘Shadow of God’, it confirmed Smith’s deep and unprejudiced acquaintance with the history of Eastern Europe. Rather than focusing on the picturesque East of ‘highways twisted through mountains, the road of the armies, the caravan trail[s]’ of ‘Serbian Letters’, Smith moves here to the Danubian Basin, the region where the arc of the Carpathian Mountains reaches the Danube River (the so-called ‘Iron Gates’).⁴⁶¹ The beginning of the sequence resembles Fenton’s way of telescoping history, elevating recent migrations across buffer regions between Eastern Europe and Russia to a wider historical dimension: definite articles sustain the whirling thrust of lines, and initially blunt the impact of Smith’s inclusive pronoun. Nevertheless, Smith is keen on tracking those ‘them’ becoming ‘us’ along specific routes, which are geographic as well as memorial routes:

The lives we live, always taking us

⁴⁵⁹ Wainwright, “‘With a dewdrop on his nose’”, p.19.

⁴⁶⁰ On the development of Smith’s poetry after the eighties, see O’Brien, *Deregulated Muse*, pp. 83-6.

⁴⁶¹ See Paul Robert Magocsi, ‘Geography and Borders’, in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004), pp. 19-31.

over some border, we spend our years
 trying to get there, in the tracks
 of old migrations through the passes,
 west and out from the land between the rivers
 down the broken roads of the armies.

Everywhere old borders, countries slithering
 on the maps, on their rafts of magma
 never still for long. Everywhere memorials,
 the dead of wars and Stalin's Terror
 in these parts, the starry graves
 of the drunk heroes of the Soviet Union,

and others unknown. Along
 the roadsides crosses for those
 who hit the brakes too soon, swerved,
 hit a bus, burst into, went over
 into the brown flood of the Tisza,
 a bunch of fading plastic flowers. (280)

Syntactical and stanzaic progression supports a swift view of places where memorials have almost faded in the midst of natural boundaries, and rivers and mountains have hardened into political boundaries: a counterpoint to this perception is offered by fluidity, which is rhythmically suggested and absorbed by the speaker's narrative as it ceaselessly opens to different stories. Histories which repeatedly come into conflict because of the swift appearance/disappearance of borders are brought into light with a sort of ironic demystification. All the emblems of mid-century history – memorials of the Second World War, of the Soviet domination, of territorial conflicts – are deprived of their iconic meaning, and regarded as elements of the landscape or scattered sites of memory where 'the names of the days are rain and wind, the names of the rivers run into each other [...] the names Sava and Drava mean nothing now' ('Shadow of God', 269).

Years before Smith's journey, this removed region attracted an older fellow writer, the Italian novelist and essayist Claudio Magris. Smith read Magris' *Danube: A Sentimental Journey* (1989)⁴⁶² while travelling and his poetic journal palpably shares Magris' sensitivity to the

⁴⁶² Claudio Magris, *Danube: A Sentimental Journey* (London: the Harvill Press, 1989).

intertwining of histories inherent in the historical memory of the people he met. This is particularly true of the Sub-Carpathian Rus (or ‘Ruthenia’) which fascinates Magris with its extraordinarily multi-cultural, historically complex dimension:

A mosaic of peoples, a stratification and a superimposition of races, powers, jurisdictions [...], a land which has seen the encounter and the clash of the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg authorities and the stubborn will to independence, and later the dominion, of the Hungarians, and the rebirth of the Serbs and the Rumanians.⁴⁶³

Magris’ prose journal was written, however, before the post-Wall age triggered new conflicts and exposed the negative side of this stratification, and before the borderlands between Slovakia, the Ukraine and Hungary became the stage of renewed territorial conflicts. In the years that followed, the case of Ruthenia was used to both deny and support a negative notion of the Balkanisation of Eastern Europe: its situation exploded the persistent, limiting understanding of nationality in years when not just ‘Eastern’ tribalism, but the rebirth of regionalisms in the West exploded instrumental oppositions between East and West.

Neither Magris’ nor Holub’s enthusiasms are totally shared by Smith; yet no less than his (respectively) Eastern and Mittel-European colleagues, Smith refrains from endorsing the typically Western suspicion of Eastern mosaic-like history. By adapting rhythm and loose digressive style to the natural geography of the land, the poet attempts to combine ‘set features’ of this Eastern landscape (its immutable’ rural areas, its numberless lost villages) with the specificity of its histories. More poignantly, he captures the ‘nonparallelism of historical times’ by openly addressing re-exhumed events or ineradicable but officially suppressed memories rooted in the inhabitants’ minds. In the poem ‘In Any Case’, the merging of traditions and memories which fascinates Magris is still there, but the Eastern landscape has absorbed new elements: on the shore of the Tisza, Smith rediscovers the residues of Communism, the tracks of migrations due to the recent urbanisation of the land and the abandonment of old rural villages. All this is included in the sweeping, panning perspective provided in the first, cumulative lines:

We took the river road to the mountains

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

through the towns of closed factories,
 where even the salt mines were shut,
 a stork preening her ragged nest
 on the tall brick factory chimney
 up through the high villages of the shepherds.

Fleeting: the fast river full of rain,
 plank bridges hung over the flood,
 wires and watchtowers over in Romania,
 halfway a steep impossible hill
 a man in a blue shirt climbing to the sky,
 the villages shifting into other tongues (*Shed* 282)

Almost unexpectedly, however, this swift depiction of landscape gives way to Smith's reading of histories. From the revived memories of pre-modern raids, he moves to the mid-century Soviet persecution of the Hungarians and that of the Jews:

To the Tatar Pass of savage raiders
 with no place to go back to. To the
 Verecke Pass, where the seven tribes
 of the people of the ten arrows came,
 long ago though in any case the date
 is debatable [...]

What of the 18.000 driven through here
 in August 1941 to be shot on the other side
 just for being Jews? What of the thousands

dead at Szolyva of cold and hunger,
 typhus and TB and dysentery for being Hungarian? (282)

The historical configuration which stresses the uniqueness of the Holocaust is here renegotiated by absorbing the mosaic-like, far-reaching memory of the inhabitants, in a way that conflates the tribal and atavistic connotations typically ascribed to Eastern conflicts with the aberrant outcome of European civilisation (the 'same old *lebensraum* scenario'). The raids of the Magyar tribes which about 900 a.C. first established their rule in the Carpathian area, mid-century history and the immediate post-war years merge together and are swept along by Smith's stanzas. The

historical background to which Smith hints suggest however an all but easy confluence: the passes which intersperse the region consequently take on a chronotopical meaning.

It is actually not merely the multi-culturalism, but the extraterritoriality of borders which attracts Smith and which he explores in its two-fold role: on the one hand, borderlands like Ruthenia are regarded as places where historical memory is still painfully alive and shared by different peoples; on the other hand, this cluster of memories kindles Smith's underlying fear lest the conflict between different 'writs' and the alternation of different ideologies might result in a lack of historical responsibility. The questions the collective agent 'we' asks, in this case, shed light on episodes which today are hardly part of official history, and may never be. Since the Czech and the Hungarian governments shared responsibility in delivering up the Jewish population of sub-Carpathia, the Jews will always be commemorated 'on the other side' of those regions, wherever this might be; the Hungarians who were exterminated by the Soviets in Szolyva (now in the Ukraine) might well haunt the present population of Ruthenia, but no document will ever prove their right.

Though the fear of apocryphal history provokes Smith's anger, this is nevertheless downplayed towards the ironic close of the poem, which might sound startling after the mentioning of Nazi and Soviet camps, yet aptly fits the viewpoint of the 'non-conquerers' and the defeated:

For half a century no one could speak of them,
put chisel to stone. *Here* it says
on the boulder over the mass graves
Here one day will be a monument.

The materials in any case have been stolen (282)

Bathos fits the controversial subversion of History often ascribed to places like Ruthenia, where the very notion of identity 'has withered as the people retreated back into their long-established

patterns of 'Schweikian' evasion of authority'⁴⁶⁴. To return to Smith's words, there are no circumstances when any kind of memory 'may not merely be violated, but dropped.'

As Doerr suggests, the subversive potential Smith detects in visions developed by those who live across boundaries is possibly foregrounded in order to prompt a reaction, and to help rooting history into stories which will hopefully outlast their protagonists. Because of his first-hand experience of Eastern Europe, Smith relies much more on the presence of witnesses than Harrison, whose poetry about the formerly 'Other' Europe does not include other voices; compared to the restraint Szirtes draws from his personal attachment to Hungary and Romania, Smith's attitude is less hindered by 'the Gorgon's gaze' and tries to touch on crucial questions of East European memory and self-identification.

Smith suggested, 'Throughout all civilisations there is a notion of those who are not included, which if you like, we can connect back to the idea of the outsiders, who have a perspective, who have a viewpoint, and we should listen to it.'⁴⁶⁵ The sharp historic-jurisdictional edge in Smith's concerns – his 'forensic interest'⁴⁶⁶ in borderlands – is the distinctive trait of his response to East, and the silences imposed on history against which he retorts occupy a large portion of his journal.

If the memory of Second World War, seen not just from a Western, but from an Eastern European viewpoint as Soviet expansion to the detriment of ethnic and national identities informs the 'Hungarian Quartets' and the 'Intermezzo', it is the voices of witnesses, of marginal and residual 'stories' that Smith tries to enfranchise. This happens as the sweeping perspective informing 'In Any Case' slows down, and Smith redirects his concern with shared tales from the frontiers to the individual trajectories people living on the borders trace across time and across space. This concern lies at the core of the closing poem in the 'Wire through the Heart' sequence, 'Malenki Robot'. This poem exhibits the 'degree of emotional directness so unusual

⁴⁶⁴ Judy Batt, 'Transcarpathia: the Centre of Europe' in Proceedings of the Conference *One Europe or Several?* (2001) Available at <http://www.one-europe.ac.uk/events/2000/conference/battpaper.pdf> [22 October 2008].

⁴⁶⁵ 'Introduction' to *In Person: 30 Poets*, ed. by Neil Astley and filmed by Pamela Robertson-Pearce (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008), DVD II, Selection 15.

⁴⁶⁶ Doerr, 'Likely through the stones', p. 33.

for a male English poet' often ascribed to Smith,⁴⁶⁷ but turns lyricism into a powerful means of historical vindication. The historical compression of the borders is conveyed here through a Gerontion-like figure whose life has been literally crossed by borders:

‘Over there in the other country
my sister had daughters I’ve seen once
in forty years, nor visited my dead.
It’s too late now, they’re poor there,
and here I’m just an old working man
and the only thing left for me to do is die...’ (Shed 286)

‘Malenki Robot’ was written *en route*, as Smith was travelling between Hungary and the Ukraine. There he found memories of the Second World War and its aftermath well alive. ‘In Russian, or rather in the Hungarian version of the Russian phrase, [*Malenki Robot*] is ‘a little light work’. The Red Army rounded up about a tenth of the men and put them in camps [...] Many of them never came back’:⁴⁶⁸ as Smith explains in the recording, the title refers to the forced labour of ethnic minorities in post-war Soviet Union, an issue which was obscured during the Cold War and brought to light again after 1989. Smith was well aware that the memory of the Second World War in Eastern Europe has not been so safely channelled into politically correct paths, as happened in the West between the eighties and the noughts. So despite his political allegiances, he tried to exhume the Soviet crimes, thus counterbalancing the attention to the crimes of Nazism to which his and his colleagues’ output widely testifies.

In order to underline the persistence of that memory in the lives of Hungarians, Smith lends János, the poem’s Hungarian dedicatee, a lyrical stringency which takes on existential overtones, and matches the power of Eastern European poetry of survival:

‘These are my blunt carpenter’s hands,
and this on their backs the frost
that gnawed them at Szolyva, three winters,
two years I was a prisoner there.
Monday I build doors, Tuesday put on roofs.
Roofs. Doors. My life. Vodka.

⁴⁶⁷ Raw, ‘Best, Ken’, p.98.

⁴⁶⁸ ‘Introduction’ to *The Poetry Quartets 3*, Tape 2, Side B, Selection 7.

It was the priest told me to go,
 three days he said, a little light work,
malenki robot, two years building roofs,
 and that because I had a trade.
 I survived wearing the clothes of those who died,
 after a while I survived because I had survived,
 and then came home and here the border.'

The multilayered, chronotopical significance Smith ascribes to borders is condensed in János' life, where the border is a physical and political barrier, a place which constantly reminds him of division: his inner tragedy depends on the presence of the border on which his story centres but through which his life and memories are irremediably wrenched from him.

János' story is the story of the defeated *and* of the survivors; it addresses people whose lives run through a wire where the writ of one age collides with the writ of another, thus depriving them of their right to their own past, and to a future. The poem points to no escape from the 'borders' and its dramatic quality is remarkably enhanced by restraint. In Smith's bitter and ironic close, instead, only music and poetry provide an articulate voice when history may only say 'Alas':

The wire runs through the heart, dammit,
 therefore we will drink cheap Russian vodka
 in János' kitchen, and later take a walk
 down to the border and look back
 into the other world, the village in the mirror
 that is the other half of us, here,
 where the street stops at the wire
 and goes on again on the other side,
 and maybe the Gypsies will come to serenade us.

APPENDIX: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Tony Harrison (1937-)

1938 Born in Leeds and educated at the University of Leeds, where he read Classics. Between 1962 and 1967 he worked as a lecturer at the University of Lagos and at Charles University, Prague. He subsequently collaborated with *Stand* magazine and travelled abroad: Nigeria, Czechoslovakia and Latin America.

1970 His first collection *Loiners* was published by London Magazine Editors, establishing Harrison's reputation as a 'working class' poet. Harrison's explicit treatment of social marginalisation and contemporary politics were met with detraction by the literary establishment.

1978 *From the School of Eloquence* (London: Rex Collings) won him favourable publicity and critical appraisal. The collection includes poems on the 'State of the Nation' question as well as on broader political scenarios, such as post-colonial Africa and communist Czechoslovakia. Harrison re-edited the sequence in 1981, adding new political pieces as well as more poems on his family and working class background in *Continuous*.

1982 After working as resident dramatist at the National Theatre between 1977 and 1979, he continued to collaborate, translating and directing several plays. His version of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and that of Aeschylus' *The Orestheia* were well received.

1985 After publishing his long poem *V.*, centring on conflict-ridden Great Britain, Harrison was recognised as the mouthpiece of anti-Thatcherite antagonism on the British scene. Three years later, Channel Four filmed version of the poem, directed by Richard Eyre, raised a furore for its overtly political content, its use of class-inflected and 'obscene' language.

1992 Harrison published *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe), his radical response to the issue of European unification. Apart from its explicit indictment of a basically economic understanding of Europe, the collection takes issue with blank zones of European memory, such as the 1945 Allied raids on Germany. It also includes two long poems on the Gulf

War, which signal his eventual allegiance to the ‘committed’ strain of the British mainstream connected with the world peace movement at the time of the Balkan crisis and after 11/9. In the early nineties, Harrison travelled across Eastern Europe and became more and more involved with journalism and creative reportage.

1995 After witnessing the Sarajevo and Donij Vakuf sieges, Harrison faxed the *Guardian* three poems about the Balkan crisis; he then continued to travel, preparing for a documentary piece on post-Communism in Central Eastern Europe.

1998 The film/poem *Prometheus* (London: Faber & Faber) met with lukewarm reception on the part of both public and critics. In the film, documentary footage on Poland and Romania is juxtaposed to a disparaging portrait of post-industrial Northern England.

2006 *Under the Clock* (London, Penguin), a collection of political and ‘war’ poems, raised debate for Harrison’s invectives against the Bush-Blair leadership. Over recent years, Harrison has been working as a writer and as a director. His *Collected Poems* have been published by Viking.

Ken Smith (1938-2003)

1938 Born in Rudston, Yorkshire and educated at the University of Leeds, where he read English. In Leeds he met Jon Silkin and other emergent writers and editors, and in 1963 started working as a co-editor of *Stand* magazine.

1970 His first successful collection, *The Pity*, was published by Jonathan Cape. Although Smith was initially recognised as a nature poet, the collection is tinged with political overtones: the refrain of the title poem is borrowed from Mao Tse-Tung. In the early seventies, Smith travelled across Europe and later moved to Pennsylvania, where he lived until 1976.

1980 He returned to England and took a teaching post in London. *Fox Running*, published by the privately run *Rolling Moss* press, became a manifesto of urban and suburban desolation in the early Thatcher years.

1987-8 Smith spent two years as a writer-in-residence at Wormwood Scrubs prison (London). The experience informs his subsequent collection, *Wormwood* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1987). Smith also experimented with genre in the collection of prose sketches *A Book of Chinese Whispers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1987).

1989 He spent a whole year in Berlin to gather material for his documentary on divided Germany. His prose reportage *Berlin* (London: Penguin, 1990) was published soon after the Wall came down, and includes a series of pieces on the so-called *Wende*.

1990 In *The Heart, the Border* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe), Smith uses poetry to depict the upheavals of 1989-90 in Germany. After 1990, he decided to travel across Eastern Europe (former Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Trans-Carpathia).

1992 From Trieste, he moved to Slovenia, Bosnia, and Poland. Once he was back to England, he edited an anthology of poetry about war, *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1993).

1998 Most poems inspired by his experience in Central Eastern Europe plus a series of BBC-commissioned poems about Hungary and its borders were included in the collection *Wild Root* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe). A section of *Wild Root* was also published by the Budapest-based Ister Press in 2001.

2002 *Shed* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe), a collection of Smith's poems from the eighties onwards, was published.

2003 Smith died in June, after a short visit to Cuba.

George Szirtes (1948-)

1948 Born in Budapest. Following the crushing of Budapest in 1956, his family escaped to Austria and England, settling in Norfolk. Szirtes trained as a painter and studied fine art at Leeds College of Art and Design, where he met his tutor, Martin Bell.

1960-70 He participated to the *New Poetry Anthologies*; he also wrote on pamphlets and chapbooks published by private presses. His mother, Magdalena Szirtes, a survivor of Ravensbrück, committed suicide after various attempts to recover from depression.

1979 He published his first collection *The Slant Door* (London: Secker & Warburg), which addresses the theme of contemporary England.

1984 Szirtes returned to Hungary for the first time since 1956, on a British Council scholarship. He spent part of his journey tracking his mother's past, and started collaborating with *Poetry Review*, contributing regular prose sketches on the situation in Hungary. His stay and his mother's story are at the core of his subsequent sequences, *A Photographer in Winter* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986) and *Metro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

1989 He spent most of the year in Budapest, writing reports for *Poetry Review*.

1991 *Bridge Passages*, a portrait of Hungary during and after the 1989 upheavals, was published by Oxford University Press. After his third visit to Hungary, Szirtes started his activity as a translator from the Hungarian, translating and editing works from the poets Sándor Weöres and Agnes Nemes Nagy and the novelists Zsuzsa Rakovski and Imre Mádach.

1994 In *Blind Field* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Szirtes' steadfast commitment to memory and history is formalised through the language of photography and painting.

2000 Poems about Hungary and his family (some of which are included in his 1996 collection *Portrait of my Father in An English Landscape*) were collected in his first Bloodaxe publication, *The Budapest File* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe).

2004 Szirtes published *Reel* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe), an investigation on 'perception' which plays on the visual cinematic register to develop themes touched upon in *Bridge Passages*.

2006 Since the mid-nineties, Szirtes has been teaching at the University of East Anglia and has been working with the Hungarian translator George Gömöri. Together they edited their first anthology of twentieth-century Hungarian poetry, *The Colonnade of Teeth: Modern Hungarian Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996).

James Fenton (1948-)

1948 Born in Lincoln and educated at Oxford, where he read Philosophy, Psychology and Politics. Thanks to his tutor, John Fuller, he got interested in Auden and the poets of the thirties. As a student, he worked in some local small presses and published his first poem-pamphlet *Our Western Furniture*, a sequence on nineteenth century opening up of Japan by the Americans and an unsympathetic portrayal of Western colonialism.

1960-75 He published his first full-length book, *Terminal Moraine* (London: Secker and Warburg) in 1972. Between 1971 and 1975 he travelled across the Far East (Vietnam, Indochina, Cambodia), working as a free-lance journalist. He then contributed to the *New Statesman* a number of articles on the post-war regimes in Cambodia and Vietnam, including an article on the fall of Saigon.

1978-9 Once he was back to England, he worked for *The New Statesman* and eventually for the literary page of the *Guardian*. His essay on the ‘Martian School’ of Christopher Reid and Craig Raine signalled a marked departure from ‘State of the Nation’ concerns on the British scene.

1979-81 Fenton moved to Berlin, where he worked as a political correspondent of the *Guardian*; after some short visits to Germany and Hungary, however, he decided to drop journalism. He subsequently worked as a literary critic for the *Sunday Times* and got interested in German theatre and German post-war culture. At the same time, he attended a series of lectures addressing the role of recent memory in both Germanies.

1983 His sequence ‘A German Requiem’ was published in *A German Requiem and Other Poems* (Edinburgh: The Salamander Press) and received positive reviews despite its oblique handling of a taboo theme: the suffering of Germans and the meaning of post-war ‘reconstruction’. The following collection, *Children in Exile*, brings together poems about contemporary Britain and political pieces on Far Eastern politics. The title poem addresses the consequences of trauma in the survivors of genocide of the Khmer Rouge.

1988 He published *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of Asia*, which includes his longest pieces on conflicts in the Far East.

1990-96 Fenton has been working as a literary critic and as English professor at Oxford since the early nineties. A new selection of his poems and sections from his theatre librettos was included in *Out of Danger* (London: Penguin, 1993).

2001 Fenton published *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), based on a series of lectures on W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, and Marianne Moore.

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