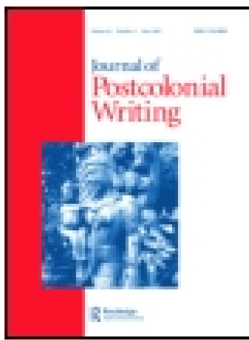

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On the periphery: Contemporary exile fiction and Hungary

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the concept of the periphery as a geopolitical and aesthetic category in the works of three exilic writers of Hungarian origin, Agota Kristof, Tibor Fischer, and Zsuzsa Bánk. These three novels, which have not previously been studied in a comparative framework, explore resistance, terror, and trauma in post-war Eastern Europe, mobilizing a set of tropes that portray the limits of everyday life in Hungary during and after the Second World War. Relying on the concept of "peripheral aesthetics", it argues that a close reading of Kristof's *The Notebook* (*Le Grand Cahier* [1986]), Fischer's *Under the Frog* (1992), and Bánk's *The Swimmer* (*Der Schwimmer* [2002]) reveals that the peripheral spaces these novels depict are associated both with the geopolitical location of Hungary and with the traumas of the post-war period. The three novels make use of various strategies of peripheral aesthetics which reflect different stages of coping with the collective traumas of the region.

KEYWORDS
Peripheral aesthetics; Hungary; Second World War; exile literature; trauma; narrative

On the periphery: Space, aesthetics, and vision

In his broadcast to the nation on September 27, 1938, Neville Chamberlain infamously called the Sudeten dispute between Czechoslovakia and Germany "a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing" (quoted in Bryant 1939, 275). He belittled the issue that was to have a massive impact on the history of Europe and the rest of the world, not because he did not recognize the gravity of the approaching crisis, but because he wanted to demonstrate the absurdity of being involved in such a remote "quarrel". In calling Czechoslovakia a distant and unknown place, as if it were located on a different continent, Chamberlain had dismissed the region from Europe even before the Iron Curtain isolated it for decades following the war. Even though his words need to be understood in the historical context of the late 1930s, his statement is by no means a singular example: East-Central Europe has often been imagined as a place "populated by Kafka's anti-heroes" (Stern 1992, 4) and conceived as a remote and backward periphery in the geographical, historical, and cultural sense of the term. In fact, the region has been "marketed" in the west as a bleak and desolate place: the absurd bureaucracy that characterizes everyday life in Kafka's works had an unprecedented impact on western culture, influencing writers and artists as diverse as Harold Pinter (1993), Nick Gill (2015), Philip Glass (2017), and David Zane Mairowitz (2008).

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It is my contention that the historical peripheralization of East-Central Europe[1] needs to be taken into account if we are to rethink Europe not only in terms of its overseas colonial history, but also in terms of the history of colonialisms and neocolonial power relations closer to home. Eastern Europe, in fact, has been conceived as a semi-oriental space, the "other" of western modernity. As Larry Wolff (1994) puts it, "[i]t was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment" (4). Described as a backward and underdeveloped place (6), East-Central Europe was seen as a mediator between the west and the "truly barbaric" eastern world in travel writings (9). In other words, the region has been construed as an imaginary periphery of Europe long before the "iron curtain descended across the continent" in 1946 (Winston Churchill quoted in Wolff 1994, 1). Chamberlain's perception of Czechoslovakia as a peripheral country needs to be understood in the context of this cultural prejudice.

In this article, I explore three novels written by exilic writers of Hungarian origin: Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*, Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog*, and Zsuzsa Bánk's *The Swimmer*. All three narratives portray Hungary during and after the Second World War. These novels have not been studied in a comparative framework until now, primarily because Kristof, Fischer, and Bánk are considered to belong to different national traditions. However, both the exilic position of the writers and the historical traumas they portray do make room for a comparative reading. As I will show, the comparison of these narratives sheds light on the ways in which the historical traumas of the region are perceived from an exilic angle.

The novels engage with the history of a country that was isolated from the west after the Second World War: on the one hand, they portray everyday life in Hungary under communism, and, in particular, the marginalization of the region behind the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, since they were written outside the borders of Hungary in French, English, and German, respectively, these texts depict the country's history from an exilic viewpoint and address a transnational audience. This position, as Salman Rushdie (1992) puts it, "is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy" (15). The three novels I explore depict three different responses to historical trauma: emotional numbness, laughter, and a sense of connectedness which counteracts individual suffering.

My argument is based on the concept of a "peripheral aesthetics", which I shall briefly explore. There are three main aspects to the use of the term "periphery" in this article. First, it is a cultural stigma based on the ways in which the East-Central European region has been imagined by the west. The idea that Eastern Europe is a secondary, semi-oriental location, literally called "semi-peripheral" (Wallerstein 1976, 465) in the sociological discourse,[2] is reproduced in these narratives, yet due to their focus on personal stories and the emotional memory of the Second World War as well as the post-war period, it is also being questioned and subverted. Second, I use the term "peripheral aesthetics" to refer to a specific *poetics* that characterizes all three novels: the tropes that depict post-war Hungary foreground off-centred, marginal, or hidden places, which do not simply recall stereotypical views of the region, but also contribute to the narrativization of historical traumas. My use of the concept of "peripheral aesthetics" is modelled on Elleke Boehmer's (2010) notion of "postcolonial aesthetics", in arguing that "postcolonial writing can be both political and implicated in a (purely) aesthetic stance" (170). As

Boehmer contends, the idea of a postcolonial aesthetics focuses on the linguistic, structural, and metaphorical features of literary works, yet it does not give up its primary interest in the extratextual, political, and historical dimension of postcolonial writing. Indeed, aesthetic features are closely connected to "the diagnostic mechanisms of resistance, terror, and post-trauma re-imagining that a postcolonial poetics might apply or set in motion" (Boehmer 2018, 35). The three novels I read explore resistance, terror, and trauma in post-war East-Central Europe, mobilizing a set of tropes that portray the limits of everyday life behind the Iron Curtain such as the "little town" in *The Notebook*, the prison in *Under the Frog*, and the border in all three texts. As I argue, these aesthetic features foreground the marginalized and the unseen, thus shedding light on the historical traumas of the region hardly perceived in the west.

Finally, it is my contention that a "peripheral vision", especially as it unfolds in Bánk's novel, reveals a new stage of coping with the collective traumas of the East-Central European region. This vision points towards a perspective that does more than simply foreground historical traumas. Though akin to Salman Rushdie's notion of the "double perspective" of migrant writers in Britain (1992, 19), "peripheral vision" is by no means a "double" vision: while "double perspective" evokes the notion of doubling and attributes greater status to shards of memory that gain heightened significance in the process of emigration (12), "peripheral vision" makes events visible as a result of narrative refocalization from a marginal position. The term also implies that the object of vision is perceived only from a distance, and that it comes into view after a "change in viewing position" (Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 3). Although all the novels I discuss rely on a peripheral aesthetics to portray the isolation of Hungary behind the Iron Curtain, it is Bánk's *The Swimmer* that explores a change in the viewing position which helps refocalize the collective traumas of the East-Central European region. This refocalization reframes the narrative of trauma, which, I argue, may assist in the process of healing.[3]

Three exilic narratives about Hungary

The novels I discuss were written by writers living outside the borders of their homeland in languages other than the native language of the country they left behind. Therefore, the position they speak from is ambiguous: on the one hand, following in the wake of Joseph Conrad, Milan Kundera, and Vladimir Nabokov, Kristof, Fischer, and Bánk decided to write in the languages of their respective host countries and, thus, their works reach a wider audience. I call these writers exilic (rather than diasporic, transnational, or expatriate)[4] in order to draw attention to the involuntary migrations they or their families underwent in 1956 in the wake of the Soviet repression of the revolution against communist dictatorship.

Agota Kristof was born in Hungary and escaped to Switzerland in 1956 at the age of 21. Her best-known novel is *The Notebook* (Kristof [1989] 2014 ; first published in French as *Le Grand Cahier* [Kristof 1986]), the first part of a trilogy set in a Hungarian border town called "Little Town" during the Second World War and in the first years of the communist regime. It tells the story of two young boys, who are identical twins. The narrative of the twins, abandoned by their mother in this town on the border, foregrounds a severely traumatized, schizophrenic state of existence. As Andrea Timár

(2016) points out, Kristof's choice to write in French "hardly expresses any affection for, let alone a sense of belonging to, her adopted culture and, particularly, language" (222). In fact, Kristof wrote her novels with the help of dictionaries (223) and called French a "hostile language", which annihilated her mother tongue (Hites 2012, 468–467). Tibor Fischer is a British writer of Hungarian origin, whose parents emigrated to Britain in 1956; he was born in Stockport three years later. His mother tongue is English, as his parents considered migration to Britain a new chapter in their lives and refused to speak Hungarian.[5] *Under the Frog*, first published in 1992, is his only novel with a Hungarian theme. An extremely funny black comedy narrated from the perspective of basketball players, Fischer's novel parodies the communist regime. Born in 1965, Zsuzsa Bánk is the youngest writer of the three; her parents also emigrated from Hungary in 1956, but they settled in Germany. She was born in Frankfurt and, though she is bilingual, she writes in German. Nevertheless, *The Swimmer* (Bánk 2004; published in German as *Der Schwimmer* [Bánk 2002]), her first novel, has been called a "truly Hungarian novel written in German" by one of the most well-known Hungarian writers, Péter Nádas (2002). In the following, I will show how all three novels thematize the isolation of Hungary behind the Iron Curtain by exploring the aesthetic features of the texts. I read the novels as narratives of trauma, defined as an experience that resists integration and representation (Caruth 1996, 4; Leys 2000, 266). In *The Notebook*, everyday life during the Second World War is portrayed as a traumatic experience, while in *Under the Frog* and in *The Swimmer* the suppression of the revolution of 1956 is intertwined with the individual traumas the characters go through in the years that preceded and followed it: the plot of *Under the Frog* begins in December 1944 and ends in 1956, while *The Swimmer* begins in 1956 and ends in 1969. Though all the novels narrativize trauma and foreground marginalized aspects of post-war history, it is Bánk's *The Swimmer* that refocalizes the region's collective traumas by positing a translocal sense of connectedness that points beyond the isolation that characterized, and to some extent still characterizes, the East-Central European region.

Hungary as periphery: *The Notebook*

Hungary is depicted as an isolated space on the periphery in the geographical and existential sense of the term in all three novels, yet the strategies the narratives rely on to deal with this peripherality are different. In *The Notebook* (Kristof [1989] 2014) the twins move from the Big Town (Grande Ville) to the Little Town (Petite Ville) at the border of the country, and, being literally situated on the periphery, gradually lose contact with the outside world. Though these cities are never named in the novel, "Big Town" is very likely Budapest, while Little Town is perhaps Kőszeg, a small Hungarian town close to the Austrian border where Kristof's family moved when she was still a child. Moving to Little Town helps distance the twins' very painful experience: the loss of their mother, who stays behind in the city. The brutality of the mid-1940s unfolds via the limited narrative perspective: the twins' overcontrolled and often inhuman behaviour reflects the trauma of the Second World War, which is also foregrounded by the present tense used throughout the narrative. This affectively "flat" position seems to offer the only adequate narrative perspective from which to recount the trauma of the war and the communist dictatorship that followed.

Names and dates are missing from the text: as in the case of Big Town and Little Town, the twins are unnamed, and the Second World War is simply referred to as "the war" (Kristof [1989] 2014, 5). Locations seem to be so unimportant that, in her recent study of traumatic testimony, Dana Amir (2019) does not even read the novel in its Eastern European context. She claims that *The Notebook* is set "during an unspecified war": "It seems we are in Europe, sometime midways the twentieth century" (37). Hungarian readers, however, might identify the references easily: it seems likely that the bombing of Big Town mentioned at the beginning of the novel (Kristof [1989] 2014, 4) refers to the bombing of Budapest in 1944, while the "frontier" (160) crossed by one of the children at the end is the Iron Curtain set up between Hungary and Austria in 1946.

I read *The Notebook* as an example of peripheral aesthetics as it relies on two tropes that, apart from delineating a geographically peripheral location, evoke the trauma of the war and the years of communist dictatorship. These tropes are embodied by the choice of the location and its name: the border and Little Town. The latter is portrayed as the antithesis of Big Town, Budapest, the cultural and financial centre of the country, which is also geographically located at the centre of Hungary. At the beginning of the narrative, the twins describe the space they inhabit as follows:

> Grandmother's house is five minutes' walk from the last houses in the Little Town. After that, there is nothing but the dusty road, blocked a bit further on by a barrier. It is forbidden to go any further, a soldier is on guard there. He has a machine-gun and binoculars and, when it rains, he takes shelter in a sentry box. We know that beyond the barrier, hidden by the trees, there's a secret military base and, beyond the base, the frontier of another country. (Kristof [1989] 2014, 6)

The world the twins describe is demarcated by various borders: the last house of Little Town marks the border of the town, followed by "the barrier" (mentioned twice in this short passage), which is already guarded and controlled, and beyond which lies the apparently uncrossable frontier between Austria and Hungary, the utmost limit of the twins' world.

This bordered, disciplined, and isolated world on the periphery can be seen as a microcosm of Hungary in the mid-1940s. The narrative, in fact, reveals more than what the twins are able to see and comprehend: *The Notebook* imagines Hungary as a peripheral and traumatized place, where the only adequate emotional response to the cruelty and crimes witnessed is emotional numbness. The twins use the first-person plural to tell their tale, a collective "we", as if no individual voice existed in this narrative: "We know that beyond the barrier, hidden by the trees, there's a secret military base" (Kristof [1989] 2014, 6). In addition, the unprocessed collective traumas of the decade appear in the limited space of Little Town: The Holocaust, though never clearly named, is alluded to in the chapter entitled "The Human Herd". A procession of starved Jews passes through Little Town:

> Nobody speaks, nobody cries; their eyes are fixed on the ground. All one can hear is the sound of the soldiers' studded boots.
>
> Just in front of us, a thin arm emerges from the crowd. A dirty hand is held out and a voice asks:
>
> "Bread?"

> The housekeeper smiles and pretends to offer the rest of her bread; she holds it closer to the outstretched hand, then, with a great laugh, brings the piece of bread back to her mouth, takes a bite and says:
>
> "I'm hungry, too." (98–99)

Though the word Jew is never mentioned, the portrayal of the procession as a "sort of human herd […] flanked by soldiers" (98) makes the reference explicit.[6] The act of denying bread to starved people is described in a cold and objective way, revealing the cruelty of the twins' friend, which also explains their emotional numbness: of course, she cannot be aware of extermination camps, but her instinctual humiliation of the victims is striking. These apparently insignificant events, which the twins are unable to name and comprehend, evoke larger historical traumas – the war and the Holocaust – as well as the individual's responsibility in the face of collective injustice.

The twins are not only unable to name what they see, but are also incapable of experiencing emotions, which is an obvious sign of trauma. After witnessing their friend's cruelty, they simply go back to the house and refrain from commenting on what they have witnessed. Taking it upon themselves to restore the order of the broken world, they put ammunition into her stove. Refusing to experience emotions is their only strategy to cope with trauma; as they explain in their notebook: "We would write: 'We eat a lot of walnuts' and not: 'We love walnuts', because the word 'love' is not a definite word, it lacks precision and objectivity" (Kristof [1989] 2014, 27). According to Amir, this lack of emotional reflection turns the twins into inadequate witnesses: "This is not a living testimony, but rather, an account that attacks the very ability to bear witness" (2019, 37). Nevertheless, I do not think that the narrative entirely fails as a testimony to trauma; the twins' affectless account is, in fact, an ethical response that testifies precisely to the unspeakable nature of the experience,[7] and this is why *The Notebook* exemplifies the first stage of reckoning with collective trauma. The novel simply registers events without self-reflection and emotional engagement: the trauma of the war is portrayed in its sheer brutality, while the rejected pain of the unspeakable, unacknowledged experience haunts the text.

The aesthetics of *The Notebook*, then, reveals a world situated on the periphery in the geographical and existential sense of the term. The twins' experience in Little Town evokes the trauma of the Second World War: the country is occupied by the Germans, bombed by the Americans, and then "liberated" by the Russians, who perpetuate the cycle of violence by raping all the women they find (the twins' friend, Harelip, is killed after she is raped by a group of Russian soldiers [Kristof [1989] 2014, 139]). Although the twins are unable to identify places and understand the historical significance of events, the paralysis testifies to the helplessness of the wider community while their detached, dry narrative conveys the brutality of those years.

Hidden stories: *Under the Frog*

Tibor Fischer's narrative, in turn, depicts Hungary under communism as a peripheral place by definition: the English title, *Under the Frog*, is somewhat euphemistic compared to the Hungarian edition entitled *A béka segge alatt*, which translates as "Under the frog's arse". This novel is mostly set in Budapest between the last year of the Second

World War, and the revolution of 1956. Whereas *The Notebook* primarily focuses on the war, *Under the Frog* devotes only one short chapter to it ("December 1944"), as the narrative clearly aims to foreground the trauma of the communist dictatorship that followed it. Budapest is portrayed as an isolated and absurd place behind the Iron Curtain, where "the black car" can arrive any time and take one to prison for no obvious reason. The day of the revolution, October 23, 1956, is depicted in the last, and longest, chapter of the novel. This is a Kafkaesque world indeed: more recognizably Eastern European than Kristof's Hungary, and more stereotypical. The main character, Gyuri, stuck in a dull factory job, dreams of going abroad: "Some modest streetsweeping anywhere. Anywhere in the West. Anywhere outside" (Fischer [1992] 1993, 3). As "the borders had been sealed up tighter than a louse's arse" (6), the characters, a basketball team, pass their time travelling around Hungary to play matches, while their acts of resistance mainly consist in listening to western jazz records and wearing US Army sunglasses. As I will show, the view of Hungary in the novel is based both on Hungarian literary and filmic traditions and on western stereotypes.

In contrast to the unspeakability of trauma experienced on the periphery, which prevails in *The Notebook*, this narrative aims to reveal the darkest secrets of the age by exploring hidden, yet all the more central, places in post-war Hungary. One such place is the prison at Andrássy street 60, which was the residence of the Arrow Cross Movement during the war and the headquarter of the secret communist intelligence called "State Protection Authority" (ÁVH) in the post-war period. The desire to expose the crimes of the age is juxtaposed with the desire to evoke its atmosphere, which is expressed by the language of the novel: not unlike the narratives of Salman Rushdie or Hanif Kureishi, Fischer's text is interspersed with foreign words that resist translation – which, ironically, become invisible in the Hungarian edition. The team, for instance, "Zrínyi out" of restaurants (Fischer [1992] 1993, 18) whenever they run out without paying the bill, in memory of the Hungarian general, Miklós Zrínyi, who rushed out of his castle to do battle with the Turks. The Hungarian names of places the team visits are meticulously listed, such as the village "Hálás" (Grateful), its restaurant called "csárda", and the "kocsmas" (pubs) of Budapest (90), where "under counter pálinka" (91) is served. By insisting on the untranslatability of culture, the novel seems to want to challenge non-Hungarian readers and locate the narrative even more clearly in its Hungarian context. This strategy, then, is the exact opposite of the way in which the twins tell their tale in *The Notebook*: the time, the place, and the significance of events are obvious, while the Hungarian words make it even more explicit that the cultural features of the region cannot be seamlessly translated into English.

Under the Frog does not, however, really challenge stereotypical, Kafkaesque portrayals of Eastern Europe: even the "untranslatable" words mentioned above foreground rather clichéd features of the country; "pálinka", for example, is the extremely strong alcoholic drink most tourists would be familiar with. The novel's black humour also contributes to showcasing a stereotypical Eastern European world that conforms to western expectations; the recurring references to under-the-counter western products is one instance of this assumed one-sided knowledge:

> The records [...] were all of American origin, which could have been tricky, but before they had thrown away a load of records presented to them by one of the visiting Soviet railway teams, they had steamed off the labels and refixed them on the jazz records. (Fischer [1992] 1993, 14)

The world portrayed here gives new dimensions to the earlier regional versions of the absurd, in their Kafkaesque guise: "decadent" western records need to be "camouflaged" by appropriate labels commensurate with the ideology of communism. Black humour, in fact, seems to be the only device that helps the characters cope with their lack of agency, one that makes the story less stodgy for non-Hungarian readers and also evokes the culture of this period.[8] The absurd humour of Péter Bacsó's ([1969] 2006) black comedy *The Witness*, for instance, a film suppressed immediately after its release,[9] is very similar to the humour in Fischer's narrative, and the atmosphere of the film is also akin to the world of the novel. In other words, though *Under the Frog* relies on stereotypes that conform to western expectations, the novel also evokes a distinct Hungarian cultural tradition.

Under the Frog is a third-person narrative, whose narrator does not struggle with identifying places and events the way the twins do in Kristof's novel. The very titles of the chapters are dates, such as "November 1955", "December 1944", and "October 23, 1956", and the streets of Budapest are meticulously named (Üllői street, Körút, Hero's square, Damjanich street, among many others). Locations that played a significant role in the revolution, such as Corvin Cinema,[10] also make an appearance, while hidden, secret spaces play a significant role in the narrative as well. The prison at Andrássy 60, for instance, is described in the following way:

> Gyuri was led underground and shown into a cell which had a feeble member of the bulb family lightning it [...]. On the wall, someone scraped "I am a member of parliament". [...] There was also in faded pencil (remarkable since Gyuri had had all his portable personal and impersonal items removed, as well as his belt and shoelaces) "If you can read this, you are in trouble". Well, thought Gyuri, here I am under the frog's arse. Under the coal-mining frog's arse indeed, at the very bottom of existence. (Fischer [1992] 1993, 127–130)

This episode is set in August 1950, in a period when the control of everyday life became unbearable, and "suspicious" people labelled as "enemies of the system" were taken to prison for no apparent reason. The narrative attempts to describe the experience directly, exploring how it feels to be imprisoned, showing the inscriptions on the wall, taking the reader as close as possible to the heart of the historical trauma. No wonder that the experience of being at Andrássy 60 is evoked by the very title of the novel: this hidden place under the frog's arse epitomizes the very bottom of existence in the novel.

To what extent, then, can we read this text as an example of peripheral aesthetics? On the level of content and theme, *Under the Frog* explores a narrative that has been peripheralized in the history of European modernity: the story of the revolution of 1956 and its precedents. The narrative's explicit aim seems to be to make up for this lack of attention. It portrays a peripheral space in the cultural and historical sense of the term: communist Hungary is seen as an absurd place beyond the Iron Curtain, while the history of the revolution is still poorly known outside Hungary. Focusing on this historically peripheralized event, *Under the Frog* reaches a western audience via the medium of the English language and helps transform the experience of the isolated

country behind the Iron Curtain into a more universally valid tale, as foreshadowed by the novel's dedication: "For all those who fought. (Not just in '56. Not just in Hungary.)" (Fischer [1992] 1993, n.p.). The novel also relies on a peripheral aesthetics that foregrounds trauma and terror: Hungary is portrayed as an isolated prison "under the frog's arse". Here the mechanism of coping with terror and its attendant trauma is black humour, which, if compared to the paralysis that permeates *The Notebook*, can indeed be regarded as another stage of coping with trauma, or at least one that is not so painfully devoid of agency. However, *Under the Frog* does not offer a peripheral angle of vision on the narrative level, which, as I will show in the next section, is necessary for a more genuine transformation to occur, and for the healing process to start.

Peripheral aesthetics and refocalizing trauma*: The Swimmer*

Zsuzsa Bánk's *The Swimmer* does not focus on the historical events of the period: it depicts life in the countryside and in small cities, thematizing the typical Hungarian inability to speak openly in the dark years after the supressed revolution of 1956 (Nádas 2002). The deeply traumatic and poetic world of this novel is profoundly different from Fischer's satirical and funny narrative; this is partly because of the novel's child narrator, and partly, perhaps, because of the "typical Hungarian" reticence Nádas mentions: it is not the revolution of 1956 that is foregrounded in these very personal stories, but rather the emotional memory of the period. In a manner similar to Kristof's use of the twins, *The Swimmer*'s narrator is a child, Kata, traumatized by the loss of her mother, who leaves the country in 1956. The novel begins in 1956, though the individual loss is never directly connected with the historical trauma of the suppressed revolution (it does not even become clear why the mother emigrates), and ends around January 1969. The fictive and the historical tragedies frame the narrative: Kata tells the story retrospectively in 1969, though this becomes clear only at the end of the novel. As in *The Notebook*, the names of significant places, people, and events are often missing in Bánk's novel, and the narrator is unable to register major historical events. *The Swimmer*'s novelty, I would claim, lies in the fact that it experiments with a peripheral vision that calls attention to the need to reassess the historical traumas of the region from an external, translocal perspective. In the most significant moments, the narrative is refocalized by someone outside, even a stranger, in a way that sheds light on the painful and isolated world of the characters yet also points towards new forms of connectedness.

While *Under the Frog* wants to take the reader as close to the heart of the historical trauma as possible, in *The Swimmer* the revolution of 1956 glides into view via a change in narrative perspective. The very chapter in which the revolution is mentioned relies on the memories of a minor character; Kata, who knew nothing about why her mother left the country, tells this story on the basis of her grandmother's tale, who learns about the circumstances of her daughter's migration when she visits her in Germany. Moreover, this significant historical trauma appears in an episode focalized through a peasant, a total stranger, who helps to traffic the main character's mother, Katalin, to Austria:

> He waited there every day, standing next to his bicycle under a metal roof near the door to the waiting room but far enough from the entrance the conductors used. […] He had waited for all trains ever since the news had come: *Something* happened in Budapest; *they* had

> smashed stone heads, stomping on the shards; shots had been fired; on the radio there had been an appeal to the world, but the world ignored us as if it had not heard, as if the radio had been invented, but not for us. (Bánk 2004, 122–123; emphases added)

Removed by memory, embedded into the narrative of a minor character and focalized through the eyes of a complete stranger, 1956 is seen as "something" that happened in Budapest. The people on the streets, meticulously described in *Under the Frog*, are referred to as "they" in this novel, who smashed "stone heads" (the act refers to the smashing of Stalin's statue, featured on the cover of Fischer's novel, yet tellingly missing in this narrative). The larger, transnational context of the event comes into view, nevertheless, through reference to the world that ignored the revolution. Thus, *The Swimmer* evokes a milieu in which, despite the fact that locations are hardly ever named, spaces and places are invested with a heightened conceptual and emotional significance, which, as Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta (2011) claim, makes them "important bases for cultural understandings of relatedness" (6). The revolution of 1956, portrayed as "something" that happened in Budapest, appears in the narrative at the very moment when the mother reaches the border of the country: the stranger's perspective connects the revolution to her act of migration via a peripheral angle. It is this peripheral perspective that relates the individual trauma, the loss of the mother, to the unnamed historical event, bringing the hitherto unseen revolution into focus via a change in viewing position.

The grandmother's story is significant for another reason as well: via this tale, the narrative crosses the borders of mid-century Hungary, showing the world "outside" that was not visible in the two novels discussed previously. Both *The Notebook* and *Under the Frog* end with the act of crossing the border, but in these two novels the gesture functions as narrative closure and the world beyond the border is not portrayed.[11] In *The Swimmer*, however, border crossing reveals a new perspective: the Iron Curtain does not demarcate the limits of narrative vision, but acts as "a join and a barrier" (Schimanski 2006, 48). The mother's affective response to the foreign country after she crosses the border brings the place she left behind into focus:

> There was no change from night to day, only a change from black to gray, and ever since it had turned gray that morning my mother had been staring at the asphalt rushing by, at the white strip that divided it, at house roofs that were gray, instead of red as they are in our country, and at the rain that was now falling again and which looked different from the rain back home. (Bánk 2004, 129)

Comparing the roofs of the houses and even the rain to the familiar sights "back home", the mother's experience connects what is inside and outside the Iron Curtain, and these everyday sights gain heightened conceptual and emotional significance in movement, literally: she is staring at the asphalt, numb with the unacknowledged loss, while her emotions are projected on what she sees. The passage reveals Katalin's emotional response to displacement: the word "gray" is repeated three times (days are grey, the roofs of the houses are grey), while the rain is simply "different", as if she were unable to find the right words to describe what she sees. As Kata is telling her mother's story on the basis of her grandmother's account, it never becomes clear to what extent these retellings transform her tale; the very narrative perspective is both a join and a barrier in these chapters, as it allows unseen experiences and emotions to glide into Kata's first-person narrative, but never with the certainty of Fischer's third-person narrator. *The Swimmer*,

then, connects the events experienced within and beyond the borders of Hungary on the affective level, even though these regions were separated by the Iron Curtain at the time in which the novel is set.

The *Swimmer* also draws a parallel between the historical traumas of the countries behind the Iron Curtain: the novel ends with a vague reference to the Prague Spring of 1968, which was a series of reforms and mass protests against the communist regime. These historical traumas frame the narrative: the novel begins in October 1956 and ends in January 1969, calling attention to the need to reassess the history of the isolated countries behind the Iron Curtain from a translocal and comparative perspective. The Prague Spring was repressed by the Soviet Union with the help of the Warsaw Pact countries, including Hungary. The event is alluded to in the novel as follows: “At the ferry dock they were saying that in Prague someone set himself on fire – now, a half year after everything was supposed to have been over – and we did not know whether to believe it or not” (Bánk 2004, 278). The “someone” referred to here is Jan Palach, a 21-year-old student at Charles University, whose self-immolation was a protest against the end of the Prague Spring in January 1969 (see also Nousek 2015, 318). The portrayal of the tragic event as a “rumour” is reminiscent of the way in which 1956 is narrativized in the novel: it is recounted as yet another marginal event seen from the perspective of the characters stuck in Hungary behind the Iron Curtain. Not unlike 1956, the Prague Spring is portrayed from a peripheral perspective, and though the two historical traumas cannot be narrated adequately, a parallel is drawn between them on the level of the novel’s poetics: while 1956 is described as “something” that happened in Budapest, Palach is called “someone” who set himself on fire in Prague. It is this perspective that reveals a different take on the collective traumas in the East-Central European region, as it helps to refocalize the individual painful experience of the countries concerned in a way that points towards translocal connectedness.

Conclusion: Varieties of peripheral aesthetics

I have explored the term “periphery” in this article, arguing that a cultural stigma can be transformed into a hopeful aesthetics in exilic literary texts. All three novels analysed rely on a peripheral aesthetics that challenges the image of Eastern Europe as a semi-oriental “other”, though the strategies they choose are different. Peripherality in Agota Kristof’s *The Notebook* designates an emotional and spatial distancing that characterizes the twins’ narrative on the periphery of the country, reflecting the unspeakability of events and feelings. On the contrary, Tibor Fischer’s *Under the Frog* depicts and names central spaces in Budapest, such as the prison of the secret services, aiming to take readers as close as possible to the heart of a historical trauma. Finally, Zsuzsa Bánk’s novel relies on a strategy I have called peripheral vision, which gestures towards coping with the region’s traumas on an affective level: despite the shattered connections that dominate the text, the narrative envisages a sense of relatedness by introducing the figure of the stranger as witness. Putting historical traumas such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968 into a single narrative framework, *The Swimmer* also reveals the need to reassess conflicting collective memories in the Central European region from a peripheral, and hopefully transformative, perspective.

Notes

1. I use the term "East-Central Europe" to refer to those Central European countries which became Soviet satellite states after the Second World War. Larry Wolff (1994) consistently refers to this region as "Eastern Europe", which is geographically incorrect, yet it reflects the cultural stigma he explores. For the difference between Eastern Europe, East-Central Europe, and Central Europe, see Lord (2000), Mishkova and Trencsényi (2017), and Györke and Bülgözdi (2020).
2. Wallerstein's (1976) definition is based on the economic strength and political background of the countries and includes a number of states ranging from Brazil and Argentina to "most of Eastern Europe" (465).
3. As Ruth Leys (2000, 105) argues, trauma can be healed by the reintegration of repressed memories: by converting traumatic memory into narrative memory, which reintegrates the memory of trauma into the survivor's life story. Narrative refocalization may assist this reintegration as it participates in the reframing of traumatic experiences.
4. According to Sándor Hites (2012), writers of Hungarian origin who live outside the borders of the country have an exilic consciousness (454) and he categorizes literary works written in Hungarian (by Sándor Márai and Áron Kibédi Varga, for instance) and in foreign languages as exile literature. On the relevance of this concept in the East Central European region, see Neubauer and Török (2009).
5. Personal communication with Tibor Fischer. He learned Hungarian as a second language when he worked in Hungary between 1988 and 1990.
6. Slavoj Žižek identifies these people as Jewish in his afterword to the novel (Kristof [1989] 2014, 164).
7. If trauma is understood as an experience outside consciousness, as Cathy Caruth (1996, 4) argues, the erasure of emotion from the narrative is, in fact, the twins' very testimony to the traumas they both witness and experience.
8. Hites reads *Under the Frog* as an interplay between British and Hungarian literary traditions: "anecdotes, jokes and characters in the text are not merely from and of Hungary, but […] remind the Hungarian reader of stories by Jenő Rejtő, Antal Szerb, or Frigyes Karinthy" (2012, 471). Gerd Bayer, not considering this tradition, argues that the novel "combines comic with tragic elements in a very original manner" (2007, 442).
9. The full, uncensored version of the film has been restored only very recently: it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2019 and was in cinemas from June.
10. Corvin lane, where Corvin Cinema is located, was one of the most significant strategic locations of the revolution against Soviet oppression.
11. Though both *Under the Frog* and *The Notebook* end with the acts of crossing the border to Austria, in Kristof's novel only one of the children leaves the country and the story of the twins continues in the next volume of the trilogy, *The Proof* (*La Preuve*).

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