

Writing Postcommunism: Towards a literature of East European ruins.

By DAVID WILLIAMS. (Ser. Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature). Pp. 231. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. £50.00. Hardback. ISBN: 9781137330079.

Writing Postcommunism is David Williams' personal odyssey. It combines his interest in comparative literature with reflections on his time spent working and travelling in Bosnia, Croatia, Germany, and Serbia in the late 1990s and 2000s. Williams argues that a significant body of post-communist literature is characterised by the semantic field of ruins, with recurring themes of melancholia and nostalgia, remembering and forgetting. He proposes the term 'Trümmerliteratur Redux' as a literary-historical framework for a 'literature of the post-1989 East European ruins' and the 'post-1989 ruins of East European literature'. From the outset, Williams states that he is not attempting a comprehensive survey in the manner of Andrew Wachtel's ambitious work on post-1989 Eastern European literary developments, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (2006). Instead, Williams uses particular writers as entry points into a discussion of East European and (post-)Yugoslav 'literature of ruins'.

In Chapter 1, Williams sets up the theoretical framework for his discussion, which centres on Heinrich Böll's 1952 essay 'Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur' ('Commitment to a Literature of the Ruins'). Williams explores the return of Böll's themes of war. Ruins are reimagined and reframed in post-1989 writings against the backdrop of the literary-critical traditions of *Kriegsliteratur* ('war literature'), *Heimkehrerliteratur* ('returnees' literature'), and *Trümmerliteratur* ('rubble literature', 'literature of the ruins'). Chapters 2 and 3 apply these theories to two post-Yugoslav novels by Yugoslav/Croatian émigré Dubravka Ugrešić, whose works Williams has translated into English: *Karaoke Culture* (2011) and *Europe in Sepia* (forthcoming February 2014). Chapter 2 - 'The Museum of Unconditional Surrender' - is about the siege of Sarajevo and post-Wende ('post-unification') Berlin, and Chapter 3 - 'The Ministry of Pain' - is about 'Yugo-nostalgia' among émigrés in Amsterdam. Chapter 4 attempts to broaden the currency of 'Trümmerliteratur Redux' as a literary-historical framework by looking at the shared thematic concerns in key works by the former East Germans Ingo Schulze and Clemens Meyer, the Czech Jáchym Topol, and the Franco-Czech Milan Kundera. This chapter finishes with a discussion of Ugrešić's novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, which Williams suggests is the beginning of a departure from the 'literature of the East European ruins'. The book concludes with an epilogue comprising several anecdotal reflections on the theme of ruins.

The book benefits from Williams' extensive knowledge of German and Yugoslav literature, especially evident in his in-depth analysis of Ugrešić's work. Due to the relatively small amount of secondary literature available, Williams makes particularly effective use of cultural and literary essays by East and Central European writers, such as Ugrešić, Kundera, Brodsky, Miłosz, Christa Wolf, Ivan Klíma, and Jana Hensel. Williams' study provides an important literary

perspective on historical research in the last decade, on individual and collective memory in post-communist Europe.

However, despite Williams' argument for an East European 'literature of the ruins', his ability to make broad statements about post-1989 literary trends is limited by his predominant focus on the work of a single author. The central two chapters are almost exclusively about Ugrešić and her work is also discussed in the other chapters. Accordingly, the book reads more as a contextualisation of the post-Yugoslav writings of Ugrešić among other East European writers, rather than as a thematic overview of post-1989 East European 'literature of ruins' to which Williams aspires. Moreover, Williams' use of the 'ruin' metaphor is mainly applied to discussions of memory, nostalgia, and melancholia. Passages on architectural ruins specifically, such as the anecdote about his trip to the 'forgotten city' of Eisenhüttenstadt, near the German-Polish border, are a welcome addition. The book as a whole would have benefited from more material on literary representations of architecture and urban landscapes.

While in his introduction Williams defines what he means by 'ruins' (p.6) and '[E]astern Europe' (p.20), he never interrogates his use of the term 'postcommunism', which leads to his problematic assumption of 1989 as a critical juncture or *Stunde Null* ('zero-hour') (p.26). Consequently, there are few attempts to contextualise the post-1989 works discussed with pre-1989 literature in the region. On a stylistic note, Williams' obvious passion for languages comes through in the imaginative flair of his prose. For example, his use of the term 'ostalgia' (p.99) derived from the German *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for aspects of life in East Germany) and Croatian *Jugonostalgija* (Yugo-nostalgia). However, at times, this tendency can become overbearing, such as in his reference to 'the specific museal sensibility of Ugrešić's novel' (p.74), presumably derived from the German *Museal* (museum-like).

To avoid the pitfalls of post-communist East European 'catastrophe tourism', the impression of a post-1989 literary *Sonderweg*, or the stereotype of economic and cultural 'ruin', a discussion of the contemporary popularity in Western Europe, and indeed worldwide, of ruinophilia and (post-)apocalypse literature is much needed. Surely the internationally best-selling and widely translated works of Tatyana Tolstaya, Michel Houellebecq, David Mitchell, Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, and Haruki Murakami, to name but a few, can be seen as forming part of a wider 'literature of the twenty-first century world in ruins'? Nonetheless, Williams' book remains a welcome contribution to English language scholarship on post-1989 Croatian literature, Ugrešić studies, and, more broadly, post-communist cultural studies.

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