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Border Tales

Against Cosmopolitan Pessimism

STEFANO EVANGELISTA

Two writers. Two encounters on the border. Two tales of borders as zones of transformation and renewal. The first is Oscar Wilde, who landed on American soil in January 1882. After moving from Ireland to Britain, Wilde now seized the opportunity to extend his international reach: America was to launch his career as poet—something that, in the event, did not work out as well as he had hoped—but also as a cultural mediator and exporter of aestheticism across the Atlantic. It is at the custom check in New York that Wilde said one of the most famous things he might never have said: “I have nothing to declare except my genius.”¹ This aperçu set the tone for his use of America as a stage of literary and mediatic self-fashioning.

Another writer who fully grasped the theatrical potential of the border was Christopher Isherwood. Many years later, speaking of his arrival in Germany in 1929, he claimed that, on being questioned about the purpose of his journey by the passport official, “he could have truthfully replied, ‘I’m looking for my homeland and I’ve come to find out if this is it.’”² Isherwood was fleeing the repressive atmosphere of 1920s Britain, where the *Well of Loneliness* (1928), and its author Radclyffe Hall, had just been put on trial. Crossing the German border marked the symbolic birth of the writer out of a repudiation of national identity.

That both of these border tales involve a dose of fabrication seems only appropriate: borders are places where identities are tested and individual lives are slotted into official narratives. Here, officials are on

the lookout for untruths and illegal traffics. Subverting the questioning ritual, Wilde and Isherwood represent crossing the border as a decisive step towards the making of a new self—crucially, in their cases, of a literary self. In this respect, it is also significant that they are both queer writers: at this time of social and legal persecution of homosexuality, the marginalization of the queer subject sharpens the critical stance towards citizenship and normative categories of belonging.

Wilde and Isherwood cast borders in an ironic light. But there is another side to their tales of privileged self-fashioning: borders are also sites of trauma, best represented by the enforced displacement of migrants and refugees. In the course of the nineteenth century, New York Harbor where Wilde docked in 1882 was the entry point into America for millions of immigrants, mostly from European countries including Wilde's Ireland—a phenomenon that the website of the Ellis Island Foundation describes as “the largest mass human migration in the history of the world.”³ The same foundation now runs a large oral history project of what it terms the “immigrant experience” and invites visitors to search its passenger databases in an attempt to recover some of the stories of those that were funneled through this narrow space that marked for many the beginning of a new life.

It hardly needs to be stated that the German border that Isherwood crossed buoyantly in 1929 would soon become a zone of conflict and fear, as Germany's aggressive contravention of the territorial boundaries established by the First World War settlement plunged Europe and large parts of the globe into another disastrous war. In *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), Isherwood later tells the story of trying to bring his German lover, “Heinz,” into Britain in the years leading to the Second World War: he failed, as Heinz was turned down at the border in Harwich on suspicion of trying to enter the country as an illegal worker.⁴ Keeping Heinz outside of Germany meant saving him from conscription and from the brutalizing influence of Nazism, but also from the very concrete threat of the regime's vicious prosecution of homosexuals.

These two tales that bookend the long fin de siècle illustrate the importance of the border as a vantage point on the complex dynamics that regulate the formation of literary identities in relation to international flows of people and ideas. Historians have long seen the decades

around 1900 as marked by a new form of nationalism that co-opted and radicalized the theories of *Volksgeist* identified with the work of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.⁵ While Romantic nationalism was driven by the belief that every people had its own right to freedom (in cultural as well as political terms), the nationalism of the end of century was characterized by mounting attitudes of competition and chauvinism, that is, by a hardening of the borders around exclusionary ideas of national identity. At the same time, however, this period also saw the foundation of a modern internationalism (a key event is the Hague peace conference of 1899, which marked the birth of multilateralism) that had a determining impact on contemporary understandings of the nation no less than the concepts of race, empire, and world citizenship. Noting these opposing trends, Glenda Sluga has suggested that the nationalist and internationalist tendencies of the fin de siècle should be seen as intertwining rather than dichotomous ways of thinking about modernity.⁶

In his 2017 presidential address to the Modern Languages Association, Kwame Anthony Appiah commented on the proliferation and naturalization of borders in the nineteenth century. He emphasized that, in Herder's original formulation of cultural nationalism, "the tropism of the boundary was outward-facing," that is, that Herderian nationalism was fully compatible with a form of cosmopolitanism that values the diversity of the world's cultures.⁷ This outward-looking attitude survives in the literature of the long fin de siècle but with a growing feeling of unease. In 1908, Vernon Lee mused that

to have had friends of various nationality has always seemed one of the signal good fortunes of [her] life, adding a meaning to that of books, even as books add meaning to the landscape given us by the eye. And to enlarge on this good fortune is not mere gratitude or self-congratulation, but, in our times of dog-in-the-manger and bluster-to-keep-your-courage nationalism, a public duty one should go out of the way to accomplish, lest the world be built over with custom-houses and barracks.⁸

Lee does not look on the idea of the nation with fear or regret. On the contrary, national differences are something to celebrate because they

contribute to the gift of cultural diversity, which is for her the ultimate object of criticism and aesthetics. The traces of national identity that she recognizes in her friends are invested with feelings of affection and familiarity—an experience that, in turn, has an enriching influence on her understanding of the meaning of books. National difference thus adds value to literature.

However, the specter of the border haunts Lee's perception of shifting notions of nationhood in an increasingly militarized and divided world dominated by "custom-houses and barracks." The dedicatee of *The Sentimental Traveller* (1908) to whom Lee addressed this tribute to international friendship was the German writer Irene Forbes-Mosse. Their close bond would be painfully severed by the onset of the First World War, when both women got trapped behind borders that all of a sudden had become impossible to cross. Stuck in England, Lee embraced a militant pacifism that alienated her from a large part of the public; she was particularly outraged by the idea that it was a patriotic or ethical duty of the English to "cancel," as people say today, Germany, the country whose national traits she recognized and loved in Forbes-Mosse. As in Isherwood's case, it is significant that Lee's friendship with Forbes-Mosse was marked by a homoerotic sentiment, which gets displaced onto the border as a space of regulation and normativity. In the long fin de siècle, the uncanny of the border becomes an increasingly queer trope.

Stefan Zweig's memoir, *The World of Yesterday* (*Die Welt von Gestern*, 1942), contains an especially vivid account of the hard reality of borders during the First World War. Like Lee, the self-consciously cosmopolitan Zweig embraced pacifism although, unlike Lee, he was initially seduced by the sentimental rhetoric of patriotism that fuelled international hostilities. In 1917, Zweig was invited to Switzerland to attend a production of his anti-war play *Jeremiah*, which could not be performed in Austria and Germany. Crossing the border from war-torn Austria into neutral Switzerland was an epiphanic experience. The small Swiss border station suddenly appeared to him saturated with all the "forbidden fruit" that was out of reach on the other side: plentiful food, a post and telegraph office from which one could send uncensored messages anywhere in the world, and international newspapers. Zweig com-

ments, “The absurdity of European wars was made physically evident to me by the close spatial proximity of conditions on the two sides.”⁹ In Austria people were sent off to fight in the faraway margins of the Empire, while in Switzerland they lived in comfort in their own homes. The border is not only a symbol for the injustice of war, but it also marks the precarious line that separates safety and danger; it brings sharply to life the counterfactual—the different turns that history might have taken.

Zweig’s idea of the “world of yesterday” cast the fragile cosmopolitanism of the European *belle époque* in a sentimental light. In order to understand cosmopolitanism, however, we must deconstruct the sentimental register. We need to deploy a critical and expansive notion of cosmopolitanism that tests this concept’s promise of universalism, its cultural genealogy, its enmeshment with nineteenth-century liberalism, its historical contingencies and its longstanding associations with social and cultural privilege. In order to do so, literary studies of the long fin de siècle can now draw not only on the insights of postcolonial criticism, but also on the different theories of world literature, planetarity and—of course—cosmopolitanism that have come to light in recent decades. Building on these, critics can continue to challenge Eurocentric perspectives by rehabilitating the experiences and voices coming out of peripheral zones, colonized spaces, and the Global South.

In the process of historicizing cosmopolitanism, focusing on the border is a useful reminder of the material reality of nationalism, which affected not only the cultural elite to which Zweig and Lee belonged, but also the masses of political and economic migrants. Josephine McDonagh has recently brought to light the extensive impact of migration on the mid-century English novel.¹⁰ At the end of the century, in an age of unprecedented global mobility, many countries, including Britain and the United States, tightened the laws on immigration as they witnessed a rise in popular discourses that stigmatized migrants and foreigners.

In the British context, a group that was often singled out in debates about immigration were Jews displaced from East Central Europe as a consequence of the vicious persecutions carried out in the Russian Empire. In the 1890s a young Israel Zangwill, whose family came from

this background, set out to describe the daily lives and history of this migrant community in a series of highly successful realist fictions. Key to Zangwill's narratives of mobility and assimilation is the image of the ghetto gates, which his migrants "carry [with] them across the sea to lands where they are not."¹¹ The ghetto, a specific phenomenon of Jewish history, becomes a trope of the culture of migration broadly conceived. Zangwill is interested in how migrant groups negotiate the cultural boundaries of their cosmopolitanism from below: how they relate to socially dominant ethnicities in their adopted countries, how they preserve and modify cultural, religious, and linguistic identities over multiple generations. In the "Proem" to his novel *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), set in the East End of London—the area that housed many of the new arrivals from Eastern Europe—Zangwill explains that "the particular Ghetto that is the dark background upon which our pictures will be cast, is of voluntary formation."¹² To recreate the ghetto in modern London—a city where there were no such formal structures of segregation—was a way of mapping a foreign identity onto urban space. In his migrant tales Zangwill shows that national borders do not simply exist in the geographical zone that unites and separates nations, but rather that they also operate inside the multicultural space of the modern metropolis, where they are transferred, invisibly, as memories of uprooting and experiences of loss and alienation.

Coming back to Wilde and Isherwood, their border tales certainly appear trivial compared to the narratives of displacement and trauma experienced by migrants and those crossing into and out of war zones. Yet, profoundly different as they are, these literary border tales exist in a continuum—a wider process of reconfiguring individual and collective identities, imagining proximities and distances within an ever-expanding world-consciousness. Large resettlements of peoples as a result of wars, colonialism and migration, modern advancements in transport and communications, international collaborations and transnational sociability—all of these factors had a transformative influence on the way that literature was produced and distributed across the globe, calling for new ways of reading.

It is not coincidental that this is also the period that saw the birth of "comparative literature"—a new field that responded to the twin

processes of growing cultural nationalism and globalization by creating structures to read literature internationally and transnationally. Comparative literature, a fin-de-siècle invention like decadence and symbolism, formulated the problem of national borders within literary studies, anticipating what the sociologist Ulrich Beck would call “methodological nationalism.”¹³ In the first book to theorize this new approach in English, the scholar H. M. Posnett (an Irish classicist and barrister who became Professor of Classics and English Literature in Auckland, New Zealand) defined his work as an attempt to find “a position on the border-lands of Science and Literature.”¹⁴ Surprisingly, perhaps, for Posnett the border that needed to be crossed most urgently was disciplinary rather than geographical. His hope was that a method based on Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary sociology would modernize and, as it were, elevate literary studies in the eyes of an increasingly science-focused world, rescuing the discipline from dilettantism and what he called “the worship of words.”¹⁵

When viewing the literature of the long fin de siècle from the perspective of borders, we must therefore find ways of conjugating their material and symbolic significance. In other words, we must bear in mind that these geographical constructs that mark the boundaries of national territories simultaneously regulate the construction of identity, affect, cultural memory, and the institutionalization of knowledge. An increased attentiveness to this convergence of spatial and cultural factors can help us recover how literature participates in complex dynamic processes of world building. In practical terms, this calls for comparative work that looks beyond the geographical and linguistic boundaries of the English-speaking world but that also respects the cultural particularity of all cross-border encounters, for instance by paying close attention to translation and to the structures that impede, as well as facilitate, the international circulation of literature. Work of this kind inevitably shifts the focus away from many of the canonical figures we have come to associate with this period in order to concentrate instead on modes of transmission and networking, and on the agency of mediators and translators whose names easily slip out of literary histories. Crucially, in mapping out the cosmopolitan modes of engagement that were fundamental to the literary culture of the long fin de siècle, our

research should not simply affirm ideas of cosmopolitanism and world literature but investigate these concepts critically. This is the way to put pressure on paradigms of privilege and Eurocentric bias.

One hundred years on from the fin de siècle, the cosmopolitan optimism of the years around 2000 has given way to the cosmopolitan pessimism of the early 2020s: Britain's exit from the European Union in an attempt to "secure" its borders, the curtailment of international mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the perceived sense of crisis in several of the great international institutions of the twentieth century—these and other geopolitical events have again put the spotlight on borders as charged sites of individual and collective anxieties. As an exclusionary nationalism raises its head again in political and cultural discourse, it is more necessary than ever to look to the past in order to understand its nature, legacies, and threats. By studying how literature is renewed by acts of border crossing, criticism can create new ways of imagining geopolitical space and new ways of resisting cultural nationalism.

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NOTES

- 1 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 152; Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), 201.
- 2 Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (London: Vintage, 2012), 13.
- 3 "Overview and History: Ellis Island," The Statue of Liberty—Ellis Island Foundation, Inc., <https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island/overview-history>, accessed April 6, 2022.
- 4 Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 165.
- 5 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Hans Kohn, *The Age of Nationalism: The First Era of Global History* (New York: Harper, 1968).
- 6 Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 3.
- 7 Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Boundaries of Culture," *PMLA* 132, no. 3 (2017): 515.
- 8 Vernon Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller: Notes on Places* (London: John Lane, Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company, 1908), viii.
- 9 Stephan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: Memoirs of a European*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Pushkin Press, 2011), 286.

- 10 Josephine McDonagh, *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People, 1815–1876* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 11 Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People*, ed. Meri-Jane Rochelson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 62.
- 12 Zangwill, *Children*, 61.
- 13 Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7/8 (2007): 286–90.
- 14 H. M. Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886), v.
- 15 Posnett, *Comparative Literature*, vi.