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TESTING THE LIMITS: BOUNDARIES AND FAULT LINES OF DYSTOPIA IN JOHN LANCHESTER'S *THE WALL* (2019)

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Abstract

This article reads Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) as a novel that tests the limits of the bleakly pessimistic 'dystopian structure of feeling', which according to Moylan and Baccolini, is a dominant sensibility today. In my reading, I foreground the inherent ambivalences of dystopian enclosures in the novel, and claim that it is in their leakiness and fault lines that *The Wall* sees the possible breaking points in the totalizing tendency of today's dystopian structure of feeling. Like other 'fallible' or 'critical dystopias', *The Wall* shows that 'no dystopian reality is nightmarishly perfect, and that its seams may be picked apart' [Suvin 2010: 395]. I concentrate on the 'seams', arguing that this is here that the cognitive paralysis characteristic of the dystopian structure of feeling, and the related incapacitation of imagination can be challenged. I also analyse some of the metafictional aspects of Lanchester's dystopia and make a case for their importance in the process of 'the education of desire', which – according to Ruth Levitas and other utopian scholars – constitutes the central feature of the broadly conceived utopianism. Moreover, this article claims that Lanchester's novel examines the debilitating effects of the desire for protection and safety, shows their dystopian ramifications and urges to desire security differently.

Key words: dystopia, utopia, John Lanchester, The *Wall*, vulnerability, oil, allegory

In the last few decades, world culture has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of various dystopian expressions in literature, film, games and TV series, all of which extrapolate from and respond to the ever-accumulating socio-political, environmental, economic and existential threats. This growing dominance of dystopia prompted the leading figures in utopian studies to describe the current cultural condition in terms of the 'dystopian structure of feeling' [Baccolini, Moylan 2003: 4; Moylan 2021: 2], by which they mean that there emerges today a not-yet-consolidated or institutionalised set of deeply pessimistic perceptions of the lived experience of the

present, the experience which tends to be articulated by a markedly bleak type of dystopia. According to Moylan, this dystopian structure of feeling is dominated by a tacit sense of impotence and fatalism, characterized by an almost perverse contemplation of the irredeemably catastrophic reality. Such over-the-top, anti-utopian, despondent type of dystopia gives up on imagining a radically different world, and becomes 'dystopia porn' [qtd. in Moylan 2021: 2], purged of the subplots of rebellion or resistance and engrossed in the spectacle of the nightmarishly transformed reality. This dystopian structure of feeling is cynical and 'post-pessimistic' [Gonnermann 2019: 27] in that it makes people embrace the 'latent Fukuyamaism, i.e., the sense that we have reached the end of history in the form of liberal, capitalist democracy' [Gonnermann 2019: 27], and that nothing can be done about the already circumscribed horizon of the thinkable. The broad consequence of all this is that the limitations of today's reality – the constraints which determine the world – become the limit of imagination, and that the (utopian) desire for transformation is compromised.

Moylan's reaction to the entrapment of the transformative, anticipatory imagination starts with his criticism of the bleak dystopian sensibility, proceeds through the disruption of the compliant dystopian attitude to the world, and in the long run, aims to stir a new, utopian structure of feeling. The present essay does not expand on the ambitiously constructive part of Moylan's project, but tries to develop its critical streak and, to that end, concentrates on the representation and problematization of borders and barriers in John Lanchester's dystopian novel *The Wall* (2019). In this novel, both the cognitive paralysis characteristic of the dystopian structure of feeling, and the related incapacitation of imagination are allegorized as the massive Wall on the coast of Britain, as a disused oil platform in the open sea, and develop against an all-encompassing dystopian background of post-climate-crisis collapse. The Wall and the platform are, on the one hand, figures of the various contemporary crises contributing to the 'dark totality' of today's world [Moylan 2021: 1] – the Brexit xenophobia; the economic domination of the West; the Western complacency and irresponsibility in the face of the collapse of the global South; the neoliberal narrow-mindedness; the anti-refugee populism; the anthropogenic environmental catastrophe. On the other hand, however, they are tropes which make visible the complications – the fault lines – latent in the dystopian attempts at sanctioning enclosure and reinforcing the status quo. Together with the utopian 'floating community' near a mostly drowned, unidentifiable island, the Wall and the oil platform test the limits of what looks like a dystopian monopoly. If dystopia is one of the 'analytical categories' deployed 'to test the boundaries of reality' [Gordin et al. 2010: 3, 6], Lanchester's dystopian allegories reveal and investigate the vulnerabilities of these boundaries. This article argues that Lanchester's novel foregrounds the inherent ambivalences of dystopian enclosures, and that by disclosing their leakiness and fault lines, it points towards the possible breaking points in the totalizing tendency of today's dystopian sensibility. Like other 'fallible' [Suvin 2010: 395] or 'critical dystopias' [Moylan 2000: 183], *The Wall* shows that 'no dystopian reality is nightmarishly perfect, and that its seams may be picked apart' [Suvin 2010: 395]. Concentrating on the 'seams', I will also

analyse some of the metafictional aspects of Lanchester's dystopia and make a case for their importance in the process of 'the education of desire', which – according to Ruth Levitas and other utopian scholars – constitutes the central feature of the broadly conceived utopianism [Levitas 1990; 2000; Sargisson 2012; Nersessian 2017; Moylan 2021]. Lanchester's novel examines the debilitating effects of the desire for protection and safety, shows their dystopian ramifications and urges to desire security differently.

From the point of view of generic characteristics, *The Wall* cannot be enclosed in any single category. Combining elements of dystopia, post-apocalypticism, climate change novel, parable, fable, speculative fantasy, allegory, and satire, *The Wall* offers a multidimensional portrayal of contemporary anxieties, dreams and constraints. The story of Kavanagh, a young British defender serving his time on the 10,000 kilometre-long, border-protecting barrier, frames a complex interrogation of a number of issues: of Western fear of Others (in the novel vaguely represented as African), the anxiety about the impending environmental collapse, the universally shared dream of safety and security, and the limited character of both natural resources and human hospitality. The central image on which all of these ideas converge is the massive, concrete Wall. It is supposed to protect Britain from floods caused by the anthropogenic sea levels rise. Like Noah's Ark, sheltering the chosen survivors against the deluge waters, Lanchester's Britain is a safe haven for these privileged, white Western societies, which – though primarily responsible for the aggravating climate crisis – cut themselves from the past, shut themselves from the impoverished peoples, and take advantage of their economic prevalence. Though ostensibly the Wall is designed to keep out the high water, its real purpose is to prevent the influx of climate refugees – Others, who escape from their drowned, uninhabitable native places. Described in terms of the flood waters ('people who want you to drown' [Lanchester 2019: 112]), the Others are figures of the feared, massive backlash coming from the worse-off non-Western societies. In the dystopian world of the novel, British people are the small, privileged fraction of the humanity who, even after a massive climate crisis, still have access to health care, university education, public transport, who grow their own food, go on holidays and watch TV. The Wall enables British people to hoard their resources and to still enjoy a relatively comfortable life.

Within the perimeter of the incessantly patrolled, heavily militarised barrier, British citizens pursue their dream of security and protection, for which they are ready to sacrifice a big part of their freedom and individuality. The two-year service on the Wall is mandatory for all young people (exception being the ruling Elite), and failure to defend the Wall is heavily penalized (for every Other who successfully breaches the barrier, there is one defender put to sea). This picture of the walled-in Britain is a grotesquely inflated version of all sorts of today's gated communities, which – as Zygmunt Bauman explains – adjust to the conditions of late capitalism and try to strike a balance between *their* safety and *their* freedom. According to Bauman, in the increasingly insecure and fragile world, the successful people disengage themselves both morally and mentally from the less lucky ones, and live their dream of security and prosperity in their insulated simulacra of community. 'What their residents

are prepared to pay an arm and a leg for is the right to stay aloof and be free from intruders' [Bauman 2001: 54]. The rules of admission into and membership of the 'community' are strict and reinforce the dystopian character of Britain. Everybody is chipped; Others who get over the Wall become domestic servants (Help) or facility slaves and are sent back when they turn sixty, even if their 'owners' protest. As a symbolic recreation of the late-capitalist gated community, whose pursuit of safety changes it into a stranger-proof 'voluntary ghetto' [Bauman 2001: 114], Lanchester's Britain operates on the belief that the only viable form of life is the one within protective-defensive walls. Ironically, with most of the world drowned or barely staying afloat, the basically *dystopian* Britain cannot but look like a highly desirable place, or at least, as a place for which there is no constructive and reasonable alternative. In what might be construed as another symptom of the passively pessimistic dystopian structure of feeling, Britain in *The Wall* embodies the belief that although there is little merit in the way in which powerful countries structure the reality, manage the world economy and organize relations with postcolonial states, it is the only available and feasible way. The idea that life outside the Wall is virtually impossible is a version of what, according to Moylan, informs and sustains the incapacitating, anti-utopian sensibility today, and what strengthens the bounded, circumscribed, no-alternative character of our thinking about the future.

Apart from foregrounding the dystopian effects of the Western desire for security, the Wall also brings forth the limited imagination of people who inhabit such 'best' of possible worlds. Kavanagh and other people of his generation are aware of the environmental collapse affecting the world outside the Wall. 'Occasionally there would be some big-picture news about crops failing or countries breaking down or coordination between rich countries, or some other emerging detail of the new world we were occupying since the Change' [Lanchester 2019: 11]. However, neither the run-of-the-mill scraps of the large-scale, overseas signs of decay, nor its domestic traces (the complete disappearance of beaches) manage to stimulate their imagination or help them to mentally move out beyond the constraints of their world. This is especially visible when Kavanagh tries and fails to imagine the life of Others beyond the Wall, self-consciously acknowledging the limitation of his imagination. During his holiday in Lake District, he reflects on the servant (Help) whom they hired for their trip:

> I'd never really thought about Help before, […] and the linked question of what their lives had been like before and after the Change, and the journeys they had made to get here, and how they got over the wall, and what it had been like to be among the Others and now to be Help. I could just about imagine burning sand, a huge yellow sun close overhead, salt water stinging the cuts, the weak being left behind, the bitter taste of exile and loss, the longing for safety, the incandescent desperation and grief driving you onwards… no, I couldn't really imagine. [Lanchester 2019: 80]

With their unimaginable past and experience, Others mark the horizon of the thinkable and remain incomprehensible both to the older generation, who never ask about them, and to the young, who can only acknowledge that they defeat their imag-

ination. The always silent Others are indecipherable signs of the catastrophe whose scale and intensity belies Western comprehension and imagination. As the unreadable other (*allos*) of the privileged life in Britain, i.e., as the materialised, particularised yet opaque representation of the unfathomable world beyond the Wall, they allegorise not only the unimaginable environmental collapse, or the Western failure to read the signs of ecological crisis, but also the inability of the West to imagine their own future. The only time the Other speaks in the British part of the novel (i.e., before Kavanagh and other defenders are put to sea) is when the hired Help provides the name of the Change (the never explicitly presented climate catastrophe) in his own language. Speaking in Swahili, he says they call the Change *kuishia* – the ending. This word and its full implications are incomprehensible to Kavanagh, whose cognition and imagination are shaped by the British periphrasis/euphemism 'Change', which emphasises 'slow violence' [Nixon 2011: 5] and gradual transformation rather than abrupt death and dissolution. Pronounced in the beyond-the-Wall language by an Other, *kuishia* – the ending – designates the limit (the end) of Western cognitive and imaginative possibilities, whose scope coincides with the line established by the Wall.

Another way in which the Wall functions as a limit of imagination can be found in Kavanagh's observations concerning the seemingly preposterous decisions of some defenders to volunteer for another shift on the Wall. Insofar as life on the Wall is 'the combination of dull uneventful days with a strong sense of purpose looming overall, the mix of aimless time, structured days and meaningful work' [Lanchester 2019: 119–120], some defenders prefer the familiar dystopia – the predicable strain and habitual fear, over its alternative, namely over the effort of thinking about an alternative life and envisioning something else for oneself. The fact that 'everything about the Wall means you have no choice' [Lanchester 2019: 3] means that the dystopian Wall is more desirable than any self-reconstruction. For all its horror, the no-alternative, Wall-based scenario proves more alluring than leaving the Wall and reinventing oneself.

The Wall contributes to a more systemic failure of imagination because it cancels the fundamental vehicle of imagination – the metaphor. As Kavanagh puts it in one of his metafictional reflections, the Wall's overbearing materiality frustrates the possibility of comparing the Wall to other things. It blots the difference between various aspects of reality (time, elements, weather, the materiality of the barrier), thereby making the basic metaphor-building mechanism of linking similarity with difference impossible. On the Wall, days are 'less like a form of time and more like a physical element. […] And then […] the two entities start to blur together, Time and the Wall, Time and the Wall' [Lanchester 2019: 14]. Kavanagh keeps repeating that on the Wall, concrete, sky, wind, air and water collapse into one, indiscriminate thing, which – for all the concreteness of the way it is experienced – resists translation into images. If imagination allows one to transcend the limits of one's reality, dynamize or transform one's thinking and generate new meanings, the Wall stands for the bankruptcy of imagination because it frustrates all creative movement and binds thought within the familiar, if unpleasant, circumstances. The immutable, impassive Wall allegorises not

only the dystopian, 'passive indulgence in our terrifying reality' [Moylan 2021: 2], but also the crippling circumscription of the horizons of the thinkable.

Apart from mapping out the crisscrossing of contemporary anxieties, dreams and constraints, Lanchester's dystopia also interrogates and tests dystopian enclosures, foregrounding their ambivalent and leaky character. While these ambivalences cannot be precipitately identified as an eutopian, more hopeful perspective, they can be treated as symptoms of vulnerability latent in the passive dystopian structure of feeling, and therefore regarded as a means of throwing into sharp relief the existence of soft spots within the currently hegemonic dystopian paralysis. As Fredric Jameson explains, such leakages and vulnerabilities are simultaneously

> violent ruptures with what is, breaks that destabilize our stereotypes of a future that is the same as our present, interventions that interrupt the reproduction of the system in habit and in ideological consent and that institute that fissure, however minimal and initially little more than a hairline fracture, through which another picture of the future and another system of temporality might emerge. [2010: 25]

For all this stringent control, the functioning of the separation barrier proves deeply problematic, and the Wall itself turns out to be a highly ambiguous structure. First of all, the Wall not so much separates the British from Others as camouflages their indistinguishability. To effectively protect British society from climate refugees, the Wall would have to sharply separate the inside from outside, self from other, safe from unsafe, alive from decaying. Occasional ruptures should not subvert its otherwise impervious and self-consistent structure. But, as Kavanagh and his fellow Defenders painfully learn, the Wall is not so much occasionally breached by Others, as permanently infiltrated and ruptured by 'traitors' who are 'working on ways of helping the Others. […] Of communicating with the Others, of suggesting places and times to attack, even, and this is the most concerning development of all, […] of helping them to disappear into our society if they succeed in breaching the Wall. Of helping to defeat the Wall' [Lanchester 2019: 113]. One such 'traitor' is Kavanagh's commander, the Captain, who used to be an Other, but managed to get over the Wall, and once inside Britain, joined 'a network of hidden support', whose members 'don't agree with the Wall. They think you need the Wall to keep out the water but not to keep out human beings. Some of them don't agree with turning people into Help. They think it's slavery. It's a big network, much bigger than you realise' [Lanchester 2019: 191]. The Captain organizes a raid (well-rehearsed as part of a training), during which he enables sixteen Others to breach the Wall. Perceived by Defenders and the Elite as a trustworthy and staunch protector, the Captain is actually a camouflaged Other, whose lasting presence on the Wall is symptomatic of the dysfunctionality and ambivalence of the barrier. The figure of the Captain shows that the difference between 'us' and Others is tenuous. His successful infiltration of the 'fortress Britain' reveals that the boundaries of gated communities are permeable, the impassivity of the dystopian constraints questionable, and that the horizon of the thinkable (allegorized through the Wall) is open to critical re-examination. In other words, it makes visible the fact that the vulnerability of the dystopian paradigm is systemic rather than coincidental,

and that dystopia does not have to reproduce itself undisturbed or unchallenged. Significantly, the challenge to the dystopian status quo operates not from the classically conceived elsewhere (a better or no place of classic eutopias/utopias), but at the very *limes* of the fortified, hegemonic dystopia. In the words of Fredric Jameson, 'the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish fulfilments and utopian gratifications' [2010: 26]. The Wall proves a monument of the faulty character of dystopian normalization, and a figure of the continuity rather than separation between the other and the native. In fact, Kavanagh understands this fluidity even before he is put to sea and himself becomes an Other. As he observes after a mock training-raid, 'a tiny bit of luck here and there dividing them; all in the same boat. All the same really. Others, Defenders – what's the difference?' [Lanchester 2019: 93]. All in all, the Wall is an emblem of the compromised dream of a perfect insulation against risk and of the desire for a full protection against all danger. The barrier's ineffectuality helps to educate desire, i.e., to rethink the way in which we pursue our longing for safety. The Wall also shows that it is at the extremities – at the circumference and the boundary, where the dystopia most intensely displays its power – that dystopia's deficiencies and liability to (at least partial) failure can be glimpsed.

This subliminally, subcutaneously vulnerable dystopia is juxtaposed in Lanchester's novel with two other places and communities. One is the 'floating community' [Lanchester 2019: 203] near a half-drowned island, where Kavanagh – having been put to sea as a punishment – finds temporary shelter. The other is an oil platform at which, in the aftermath of a pirates' attack and the destruction of the floating community, Kavanagh and his girlfriend Hifa find the much needed sanctuary. Both the floating community and the oil platform are counterparts of Britain, and can be read as testing grounds for modifications of the dystopian model of communal life adopted in the fortress-like island. They represent two different revisions of what turned out to be a faulty model of protection-*cum*-coercion, and they reimagine the fortress-Britain-type of response to what Bauman calls 'a life of risk' [Bauman 2001: 60], i.e., to the endemic sense of insecurity and precariousness generated by various globalized threats (environmental crisis, political instability, economic exploitation, etc.).

The floating community is established through 'a series of accidents and coincidences', with new members coming 'from nowhere and anywhere' and joining 'piecemeal and over time' [Lanchester 2019: 203]. Everybody is accepted, and all members work for the benefit of the group. The community is made up of rafts and boats tied together, constituting an obviously fragile, extremely vulnerable structure which, unlike Britain, cannot and does not try to make itself impervious either to the weather and the elements, or to people who come to take advantage of their accumulated (but meagre) resources.[1] The literal and metaphorical shakiness of the floating community stands

[1] This vulnerability is epitomised by the now non-combatant Captain and his gesture aimed at the approaching pirates: he 'spread his arms to their full width. […] the gesture meant: we have no weapons. We are at your bidding' [Lanchester 2019: 230]. The pirates shot the Captain dead even before they set foot on the rafts to search them.

in contrast to the concrete-dependent stability of the dystopian Britain. In terms of its location, the community at first seems to be a miniature version of the British island: it is established near inaccessible cliffs, which are 'variations on a theme: vertical stone' [Lanchester 2019: 200], with no landing place in sight. But unlike the still inhabitable Britain, this island has been flooded over, so there is nothing of the old world left to be salvaged, hoarded and protected at all cost. In a symbolic scene when Kavanagh dives towards the drowned slopes and houses to collect seaweeds and scallops, he prepares himself for 'no visibility' [Lanchester 2019: 211), i.e., for doing his share of communal job in the absence of any old, recognizable orientation points. As none of the old categories make sense here, the community has to reimagine itself from scratch. As Kavanagh broods, 'If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us' [Lanchester 2019: 203].

Through the image of the floating community, the novel offers a utopian alternative to its representation of the passive dystopia developed in the British section, and by emphasising the community's openness, fluidity, minimalism and tentativeness, it works out a version of what is labelled today a 'critical utopia' [Moylan 1986: 1], 'partial vision' [Bammer 1991: 4], 'microtopia' [Edwards 2009: 775] or 'iconoclastic' utopia [Jacoby 2007: xv]. It actualizes Kavanagh's dream from the British part of his life, a dream of 'going off together and finding a new way of living, more communal, not family-based but where we would live together and look after each other and maybe other like-minded people would join us' [Lanchester 2019: 119]. True to the precarious character of its minimal utopian form, the floating community is destroyed in the aftermath of an attack of pirates, who come for water, food and women. While the novel does not criticize what Jameson would identify here as the community's 'utopian impulse' [Jameson 2005: 1], it does draw attention to the self-defeating character of the unmitigated vulnerability of the group, and seems to put blame for it on the lack of any protective barrier. Although the British heavily guarded, insulating structure failed to protect the island from the influx of what they wanted to keep outside and instead nourishes the place's dystopian character, the viable alternative to this claustrophobic dystopia is not the total exposure exemplified by the floating community. However admirable the openness, morality and tenacity of people deprived of any historically acquired and accumulated privileges, their ability to stay afloat and maintain a just social order is blighted by their inability to at least partially immunize themselves against harm. The failure of the community that materialized Kavanagh's dream of a shared, safe life is a step in the process of educating desire, a lesson of desiring in a different way since the desire for togetherness should involve the process of re-imagining protection and boundaries.

When the floating community is destroyed, Kavanagh and Hifa – the only survivors – drift south and reach a disused oil platform, which figures as another variant of the inaccessible and well-guarded place of safety. In contrast to the two islands, the platform is a perfectly controllable place, whose boundaries are practically impervious to all intruders. Kavanagh and Hifa are let into the installation by the only inhabitant of the structure – a solitary, mute man, who Prospero-like monitored their jour-

ney and lowered a ladder for them. The 'hermit' [Lanchester 2019: 263] accepts the couple into his circumscribed paradise and decides to share with them his resources: food and oil. No longer cold, hungry or unprotected, they enjoy the privilege of secure and satiated life, rare in the environmentally destroyed world. Although the platform seems to embody the model of the 'separatist utopia' [Sargisson 2012: 74] and tries to carve out a better life only for its members, it is striking that rather than becoming a positive alternative to the dystopian Britain, it repeats the British dystopian pattern of benevolence-for-the-members and hostility-towards-the-uninvited.

Moreover, the novel suggests that, like in the British case, the invulnerability of the small platform society has its limits, and its seemingly total immunity has its weakness. Insofar as the supply of oil kept in the platform tower is finite ('However much there is, it's a finite supply, it can't last forever' [Lanchester 2019: 260]), the security it offers will come to an end, and new ways of life will have to be imagined. By making the survival of his characters depend on oil, Lanchester foregrounds an important, if most frequently overlooked limitation of the contemporary world: its dependence on the finite fossil-fuel sources of energy. As emphasized in the recently established petrocultures studies, oil is not merely an element of the contemporary world, supporting the pre-existing social forms, but the very framework '*fundamental* to the societies we have now' [Szeman 2013: 147, original emphasis], and the ontological support conditioning industry, economy, social phenomena and politics. In the novel, the metal structure of the oil rig is literally the condition of possibility for the characters' survival: it provides firm ground in the middle of the sea; it protects from all sorts of Others; oil supplies accumulated inside the platform grant warmth and light. In *The Wall*, oil functions as an allegorical concretization of the otherwise abstract dimensions of life in late modernity. As Imre Szeman argues, 'Despite being a concrete thing, oil animates and enables all manner of abstract categories, including freedom, mobility, growth, entrepreneurship, and the future in an essential way' [2013: 146]. In *The Wall*, oil symbolizes not only independence or comfort, but also civilization enjoyed by Western, fossil fuels-based societies. With oil, the characters can cook food rather than eat it raw, and read books rather than sit in complete darkness. Kavanagh's description of the oil lamp as his 'bounty, […] booty, […] plunder, […] gift' [Lanchester 2019: 274] foregrounds both the idea that as a source of light, oil enabled and shaped social imaginaries, and the fact that the development in conjunction with the energy resources is often based on ecological violence and social injustice. But more importantly, by emphasizing the finite character of oil supplies and pointing to the looming prospect of life away from the platform, the novel invites readers to think of something as-yet-unimaginable – their own future without oil-derived products, and encourages them to go beyond the oil-dependent imaginary. The boundaries of the platform community, set up and sustained by oil industry, represent the boundaries of the late capitalist societies, whose practices, values and beliefs – and their dystopian late capitalist reality – are conditioned by fossil fuels. The vulnerability of the former is to be treated as a symbolic representation of the vulnerability of the latter.

Lanchester's exploration of the vulnerable boundaries of his dystopia and its ambivalent fault lines does not conclude on any decisive note. The characters never actually confront the future outside the platform. When the hermit shows them a rather enigmatic, cardboard-box performance representing a search for protection and security around an inaccessible place, they reduce its broad significance to their own situation and thereby, fail to see (or imagine) the universality of what is played out in front of them. Understandably preoccupied with their own safety and their own story, they cannot but reproduce the 'selfish desire', the 'self-interested turning away from the world' [Lanchester 2019: 112], of which British people were accused earlier. This mental and imaginative insulation is metafictionally emphasized when, at the very end of the novel, Kavanagh starts telling Hifa a story, and when what he says repeats the first words of the novel: 'it's cold on the Wall' [Lanchester 2019: 276; 3]. The story folds back on itself: the ending loops back to the beginning, as if both the characters and the reader were entrapped within the dystopian narrative. This circularity may be understood as an allusion to the insurmountability of the passive dystopian structure of feeling, as a reluctant acknowledgement of the tenacity of its constraining, incapacitating character. But perhaps, if we agree that work against the dystopian despair involves 'showing […] boundaries to be porous and creating new spaces in which to explore, imaginatively, conceptually or experientially, better ways of being' [Sargisson 2021: 242], Lanchester's novel will net be seen as merely reproducing the dystopian structure of feeling identified by Tom Moylan. Testing the limits and exposing the fault lines of dystopia, *The Wall* reminds us of the vulnerability of dystopia, and though it fails to construct a viable alternative, it enacts the motto cogently expressed by Sargisson – that it is essential to try to reveal the porosity of the binding structures, to try again, fail again, and fail better.

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