

CULTURAL TRANSLATION: MIROSLAV PENKOV'S *EAST OF THE WEST*

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Резюме: В статията се анализират разкази от сборника „На Изток от Запада“ от български автор Мирослав Пенков. Сравняват се двата текста – оригиналът написан на английски език и преводът извършен от самия автор на родния му език – с цел да се изследва преводният акт като културологичен процес на пренаписване не само на лингвистично ниво, а по-скоро за да се проследи динамичната трансформация на личността на имигранта и на взаимопроникването на българските и американските културни пластове. Изследва се опита за предефиниране в текста на понятия като национална принадлежност, родина, роден език, граница, свое-чуждо, изток-запад в постколониалния, глобализиращ се свят. Фокусът пада на два от разказите в сборника – „На Изток от Запада“ и „Как купихме Ленин“ – с цел да се изследва акта на „себепревеждането“ като вид себепознаване и изучаване на родното от позицията на дистанция на мигриращия, космополитен, постмодерен човек.

Introduction. Miroslav Penkov's widely acclaimed short story collection *East of the West* is an illustration of “migrant writing.” This is a category of fictional writing which, in my view, is distinct from the great variety of narratives focusing on the comparable themes of exile, immigration, uprooting, and dislocation. First among these are the exilic narratives – autobiographies and memoirs – written about the traumatic experiences of Bulgarian exiles who left their home country prior to 1989 with no prospects of ever returning;¹ in a second group fall the stories of travels to North America – mostly non-fictional travelogues – which have appeared in great numbers from the 1990s onwards.²

¹ I am listing here some those originally published in English, with the exception of the first one: Любомир Канов. *Между двете хемисфери*. София: Издател Анго Боянов, 2002; Lilia McGinnis. *The Echo of Memories. A Memoir from Both Sides of the Iron Curtain*, Bloomington: Author House, 2004; Vladislav Todorov. *Red Square/Black Square. Organon for Revolutionary Imagination*. Albany: SUNY, 1995 <<http://vladislavtodorov.com/RedSquareBlackSquare.aspx>>; Капка Касабова. *Street Without Name. Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria*, London: Portobello Books, 2008; Radka Yakimov. *Café “The Blue Danube”*, Bloomington: iUniverse, 2010; Radka Yakimov. *Ashes of Wars. A Twentieth Century Story*, Bloomington: iUniverse, 2011.

² Some of the travelogues that came out in the 1990s in Bulgarian: Марко Семов. *И за Америка като за Америка*. София: ИК Пейо Яворов, 1991; Величко Андреев. *Мозайка от САЩ. Как се забогатява, махалото и още нещо*. Пловдив 1993; Калина Стефанова. *Нюйоркчани*. София: Издателство „Весела Люцканова“, 1995; Пепа Витанова и Иван Кулеков. *Америка – дъжд на морското дъно*, София: Факел, 1995; Веселина Седларска. *Мечтах за Мисисипи*. София: Български журналист, 1996; Божидара Брозиг. *Докосване до Манхатън и Ню Йорк*. София: Пирамида 91 ЕООД, 1999; Стефано Кристофф. *Ню Йорк и Монреал и части от Америка и Канада*. София: Дъга принт“, 2001; Милена Димитрова. *Една година в Америка*.

While these two groups are largely non-fictional, occasionally bordering on the factional, the “migrant writings” that have been published in the last decade are rendered predominantly as fictional tales.³ This latter type of narratives that have recently appeared are produced by writers of Bulgarian descent who have for the large part migrated to North America – USA and Canada – and have chosen to write mostly fictional texts articulating their experiences of migration from the East to the West.

I prefer to use the terminological expression “migrant writings,” since it is my understanding that the very nature of immigration has changed. It is no longer the conclusive act it used to be in the past, especially prior to 1989, but rather a transitory and temporary process of mobility in a globalized world. The very concepts of borders, center and margins have become fluid and destabilized just as existing nations and nation-states have been undergoing a rigorous reconsideration. Consequently, at present immigration can be interpreted not only as a physical movement, a kind of nomadism, but rather as a state of mind: a restlessness, a constant anxiety about the future by way of the traumatic return to the past.

Penkov’s position, however, is in a way unique among the Bulgarian authors of migrant writings in that he wrote his stories originally in English, published them outside his home country, and received international recognition and high appraisal for his literary achievement.⁴ Only then was the collection published in Bulgarian, moreover in the translation of the author himself. This ‘reversed’ approach in choosing to write in one’s second language and then translating that very writing in one’s own native tongue is what I find rather unusual and worth exploring. Penkov’s treatment of language, identity and home serves as the grounds for reflection on the nature and significance of cultural translation of self, of belonging and foreignness, of loneliness and communality, of dislocation and acculturation in a global but deeply troubled world.

In addition, Penkov’s collection can be analyzed as an illustration of the current trend of re-thinking the interconnectedness between Bulgaria and America, not so much in socio-historical and geographical, as in mythological and cultural terms. This need to explore the relation between homeland and promised land,

София: Европрес, 2003; Константин Колев. *Ню Йорк, Ню Йорк*. София: ИК „Колинс“, 2004; Веселин Давидков. *USA – ОК. До Чикаго и напред*. София: Сиела, 2009; Иво Стефанов. *Със зелена карта в Америка*. София: Издателство „Весела Люцканова“, 2010. The list is by no means complete.

³ Милена Фучеджиева. *Белият негър/ The White Nigger*. София: Биг Бенг и Гекон, 2001; Алек Попов. *Черната кутия*. София: Захари Стоянов, 2007; Захари Карабашлиев. *18% сиво*. София: Сиела, 2008/ Zachary Karabashliev. *18% Gray*, Translated from Bulgarian by Angela Rodel, Rochester: Open Letter Press, 2013; Илия Троянов. *Светът е голям и спасение дебне от всякъде*. Translation from German. София: Сиела, 2007.

⁴ His short story “Buying Lenin” was selected by Salman Rushdie as guest editor for the collection *Best American Short Stories 2008*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

between East and West seems to have acquired a greater urgency in recent times, not just in the literature of writers such as Miroslav Penkov, Zachari Karabashliev, and Alek Popov among others, but in Bulgarian pop culture in general, and more specifically in movies and TV series.⁵

Penkov's book in its English version has the subtitle *A Country in Stories*, thus focusing on the representation of Bulgaria as an imaginary land, a mental space where the subjective reconstructions of myth, legend and history take place. Living away from one's homeland triggers the writer's imagination. The emotional turmoil of dislocation acts as muse, as the source of inspiration the writer can tap to. The land of origin becomes the imaginary country, as posited by Salman Rushdie in his now classic essay "Imaginary Homelands," and by portraying it, the writer is portraying "no more than one version of all hundreds of millions of possible versions" (Rushdie 10) located in the past, itself "a country from which we have all emigrated" (Rushdie 12). Penkov questions the very idea of belonging in a cosmopolitan world. Nose, one of the most memorable characters of his stories, asks "What binds a man to land or water?" (2011: 49) Accordingly the main questions the collection posits are: What does it mean to live in translation, moreover in a postcommunist and a postcolonial world? How is nationality, tradition, community, identity and self reconstructed when transmitted from one language and culture to another?

The discussion of the contemporary literature of migration requires an interchange between different linguistic planes, between a variety of socio-political and cultural perspectives. Cultural translation is a peculiar mode of translation, not any longer only a linguistic transaction, but a complex negotiation between cultures, which presupposes a new understanding of translingual and transnational identities. It is informed by the understanding of translation as a movement of self between languages and cultures, as a form of dynamic transformation, which can be traced back to Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* (1999). Cultural translation is hereby interpreted essentially as the complex interconnection between self and others, between object of translation (the text) and subject of translation (imaginary worlds).

Cultural Translation. For the purpose of the current analysis the theoretical approach of cultural translation is seen to possess a singular appropriateness and validity. The act of translation even when narrowly conceptualized as language

⁵ Some examples of such movies: Писмо до Америка/ Letter to America, dir. Iglia Triffonova, 2001; Емигранти/ Emigrants, dir. Ivailo Hirstov and Ljudmil Todorov, 2003; Светът е голям и спасение дебне от всякъде/ The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner, dir. Stephan Komandarev, 2008; Стъпки в пясъка/ Footsteps in the Sand, dir. Ivaylo Hirstov, 2010; Тилт/ Tilt, dir. Victor Chouchkov, 2011; the TV series 7 часа разлика/ 7 Hours Difference, dir. Magurdich Halvajian, 2011.

transfer is always an act of intermediation between cultures. However, in the past several decades translation has moved away from the narrow linguistic approach focusing on the dichotomy of correspondences and dissimilarities between the original text and the translated text; on issues such as translation equivalence and fidelity; on the translator as 'traitor.' There has been a growing awareness that translation is a dynamic act of representation and interpretation, performing a significant cultural function.

The linguistic, text-based approach of translation studies proper has been extended to include diverse aspects of cultural analysis from a variety of perspectives: sociological, anthropological, literary, postcolonial, etc. It seems a logical continuation of this approach that cultural studies, largely within the frame of postcolonial and postmodernist discourses,⁶ and translation studies have merged into the hybrid field of cultural translation. Cultural translation sets out to examine not so much the transition of texts from one language into another, though that certainly can be a valid area of exploration within the field, but rather looks to explore the active intercultural exchanges. Thus, its focus falls mainly on the diversity of cultural contacts and is in accordance with H. Bhabha's view of the "performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference" (Bhabha 1994: 212).

Hence, the term translation undergoes a semantic expansion to incorporate various forms of cross-cultural encounters, especially in movements across borders, in acts of displacement, requiring cultural negotiation, rewritings of self and memory. For this reason cultural translation is especially suited to the migrant's exploration of uprooting and self-transformation, to the practices of acculturation, resistance and accommodation between host and target cultures. In addition, it offers a privileged vantage point to such migrant writers to examine the various assumptions not just about the receiving culture, but about their own culture, accompanied by acts of intensive self-scrutiny.

H. Bhabha's theoretical writings challenge the more narrow definition of translation and establish its connection to displacement, to "the liminality of the migrant experience" (Bhabha 1994: 224). Bhabha's questioning of the foundational concepts of language, nation, subject and character can be applied as a useful tool in the analysis of narratives of immigration focusing on voluntary displacement, where authors and characters become interpreters of culture. This "literature of migration" maintains a constant dialogue across languages and cultures ultimately leading to Bhabha's notion of "third space", where acts of signification and cultural translation take place (Bhabha 1990: 207). It is a site of tension, of competing powers: "The non-synchronous temporality of global and

⁶ For more information on the interconnection between the fields of Translations Studies and Cultural Studies see H. Trivedi. "Translating Culture vs Cultural Translation", in P. St-Pierre and P.C. Kar (eds.). In *Translation – Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2007, pp. 277–287.

national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences...” (Bhabha 1994: 218). “Third space” for Bhabha denotes the undermining of hegemonic cultures, making possible intermingling, leading to new forms of hybridity and heterogeneity both in linguistic and cultural terms. This process is creative, productive, and acts as an eye-opening experience that broadens the migrant’s perception of the world.

The Author and the Text. Miroslav Penkov was born and raised in Bulgaria. He moved to the US in 2001 to study on a scholarship. After receiving a PhD, he has been teaching creative writing at the University of North Texas and working as a fiction editor for the *American Literary Review*. His short stories have appeared in several prestigious fiction magazines and collections of stories. His first book, *East of the West*, written in English and published in 2011 in the U.S., has won a number of awards and was a finalist for the 2012 William S. Royan International Prize for Writing. The title story won the BBC International Short Story award for 2012. In Bulgaria the short story collection appeared under the title „На изток от запада“ in Penkov’s own translation and became one of the best-selling books for 2012 in his home country.

The collection comprises eight vignettes, which cover the period from the end of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria in the late 19th century, exploring life in the Communist state, the Cold War ethics and politics up until 1989, to the contemporary period where many young Bulgarians enter green-card lotteries to (im)migrate elsewhere. It portrays the political upheavals, the acts of disuniting on national and communal level, alongside instances of personal disruption and loss.

The stories focus on a number of major events in the history of Bulgaria, its economic hardships and challenges. One can read about the fall of communism when the author was seven, the electricity blackouts, the poverty in urban centers and small villages in “East of the West,” “Cross Thieves,” “A Picture with Yuki,” and “The Letter.” There are stories conveying the hardships of immigration, poignantly translating the pain of the immigrant experience, the alienation and homesickness of the immigrant as in “Buying Lenin” and “Devshirmeh.” What constantly re-surfaces in all the stories is the link to the past in legends and folk tales, even the very distant past, presented as integral to the present. Penkov sees such intermingling of past and present in the narrative as a powerful liberating force:

I wanted to inject my own life into it, [to write about] myself, abroad in America and in many ways alone, with a huge body of water between me and the people I love ... It’s a very sprawling story, in which I tried to show myself how to take life’s losses and not view them as punishments but as something liberating, and ultimately leading to freedom. (Flood 2012: no page)

Merging a multitude of voices, time planes and geographical places, Penkov chooses to write in a variety of realistic modes, incorporating oral materials such as myths, folk tales and legends. Some of the stories, for example “The Night Horizon” and “Devshirmeh,” are written in the magical realistic mode where characters and events assume larger than life, mythical proportions. Others are presented in the absurdist mode, “Buying Lenin” for instance, which largely contributes to the fact that the narratives are so painfully and hilariously effective.

Penkov’s stories raise an array of theoretical concerns pertaining to post-colonialism, postmodernism, post-totalitarianism, cultural studies, and language studies. The text provides abundant material for cultural analysis of language in translation, self in translation, history in translation and geography in translation, where each of these can be further broken down into discrete levels for consideration and exploration. The focus of this paper is narrowed down to the study of the transformation of the self as a consequence of migration, the crucial role that language plays in this process in the story “Buying Lenin,” alongside the fluidity of boundaries in the title story “East of the West.”

Language and Self in Translation. Penkov is a translingual. He has written his stories about Bulgaria in English, a language he did not begin to learn until he was 14. He pleads on the final page of his book “forgive me, beautiful Bulgarian language, for telling stories in a foreign tongue, a tongue that is now sweet and close to me” (2011: 226). The author has resorted to literary appropriation, to borrow a term from postcolonial theory, by choosing to write in a language that does not derive from his own background and culture. With this choice he actually problematizes the position of Bulgarian culture as a marginalized one in terms of the West. Hence he tries to tell stories from his own outsider culture to the dominating, Western, English-speaking ones. With this Penkov acts as a cultural interpreter, presenting often a double focus, from home and from abroad, and addressing two potential audiences.

The English text abounds in Bulgarian expressions, culture-specific words and concepts, which he leaves in most cases to be self-explanatory, without attempting to fill in missing information. In some cases, however, he provides multiple definitions (as is the case of *yad*)⁷ or long descriptions to fill in the cultural gaps. Penkov has tried to render the impression of local color by providing eth-

⁷ In the last story in the volume, “Devshirmeh”, an expatriate resigned to a squalid existence in Texas, to which he has followed his former wife and their daughter, explains this culture-specific concept:

It’s *yad* that propels us, like a motor, onward. *Yad* is like envy, but it’s not simply that. It’s like spite, rage, anger, but more elegant, more complicated. It’s like pity for someone, regret for something you did or did not do, for a chance you missed, for an opportunity you squandered. (2011: 201)

nographic details and resorting to the (self-)exoticization of Bulgaria through the abundant use of realia. He has opted for preserving a large number of words in the original language, which he has transcribed in English, for instance: *sbor*, *rakia*, *terlitsi*, *zograf*⁸, *havanche*, *mednik*, *samodivi*, *vampiri*, *karakonjuli*, *tsludumi*, *feredje*, just to name a few. Alongside these, there are other intractable in translation cultural references to historical figures such as Mitko Palauzov, for example, the youngest Bulgarian communist guerilla fighter, whose name is casually mentioned in the story “Buying Lenin” (2011: 57) and who would not trigger any association in the minds of most non-Bulgarian readers.

In this story a grandson who goes to study in America tries to buy the corpse of Lenin on eBay for his grandfather who refuses to give up his communist ideals in post-1989 Bulgaria. Within the frame of this dichotomy between East and West, past and present, the umbilical cord that links him to his home and the alienation and loneliness experienced in the foreign land, Penkov stages a much more elaborate internal conflict: that of the necessity to have ideals and to hold onto them as an important survival strategy in a world of constant upheaval. The domineering and intimidating grandfather comes to represent for the grandson not just the lost home – those Balkan slopes he starts dreaming about in America, but rather the dread of not belonging anywhere, of being lost. The protagonist has the painful revelation when he moves to study in a college in the US that “no one knew where I was from, or cared to know. I had nothing to say to this world” (2011: 60).

The grandson at first makes great fun of his grandfather’s blind devotion to Lenin’s ideals. But his initial scorn and disrespect for his grandfather’s defunct idealism slowly gives way to envy, as the grandson feels his own lack of dreams or ideals as a gap, an internal rupture. In a way, it is ironic that the protagonist goes to America – the New World, the land of endless opportunity and the American Dream – not driven by any idealistic aspirations of his own, or any dreams of a new and better life that have stirred for centuries the immigrant’s mind and acted as a powerful incentive. He admits that “there was no good reason for me to be in America. Back home I wasn’t starving, at least not in the corporeal sense. No war had driven me away or stranded me on foreign shores. I left because I could, because I carried in myself the rabies of the West” (2011: 56).

The protagonist of this story who remains unnamed, but who the grandfather addresses as *sinko*, i.e. the diminutive of ‘son’, is a character clearly modeled on Penkov himself. As a boy in Bulgaria, he claims that while his “peers were busy drinking, smoking, having sex, playing dice, lying to their parents ... or making bombs for soccer games, I studied English” (2011: 55). Accepted (like Penkov)

⁸ Penkov has provided an explanation of *zograf* within the narrative “a master of icons” (2011: 34).

to college in Arkansas, the protagonist soon learns that lurking behind his second language is a third, the one that says, “it was fixin’ to rain”, “a bummer” and “yonder” (2011: 60). He continues: “I was exposed to words I didn’t know. ... What was a hotpocket? I wondered. Why was my roommate so excited to see two girls ... making out. What were they making out?” (2011: 60). So the narrator immerses himself into his second language, soaking in the vernacular until “the words rose liberated. I was ecstatic, lexicon drunk” (2011: 60).

But before he comes to that point Penkov passes through a stage similar to what Eva Hoffman has described in her memoir *Lost in Translation*:

The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue [...] this radical disjoining between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of colours, striations, nuances – its very existence. It is the loss of a living connection.

Hoffman 1989: 106–107

Much of what Penkov has written regarding the trauma of migration with the special focus on language as instrumental to the construction of identity is reminiscent of Hoffman’s experience of the self, lost and found in translation. She has extensively written about the need she felt to “murder” her mother tongue, which was experienced as a threat to the new language she had to acquire. The new language needs to be internalized, while serving as a lens through which to look at the world. My understanding is that Penkov in a similar manner felt the necessity to write in English in order to complete this process of internalization of the foreign language, of making sense of the world anew, described as a painful and harrowing experience in the story “Buying Lenin”. The acquisition of a language though not equal to the acquisition of a new identity in the course of acculturation obviously has a serious bearing on it.

The migrant undergoes the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the notion of self and one’s own sense of place in multiple realities. One of the central themes of the book is the preservation of one’s native identity and the possibility of survival in non-native places. As Penkov himself admits “[...] I wanted to write a story about myself, abroad in America and in many ways alone, with a huge body of water between me and the people I love” (Flood 2012: no page). The stories are deeply affected by the nostalgia felt by the author, which spills out in the empathy and gentle humor with which he portrays the multitude of Bulgarian characters, some of which seem lifted from Bulgarian folk tales and legends, and still others from the works of the Bulgarian classical writers on country life: the peasants from the small villages and farms of the late 19th and early 20th century. For the Bulgarian reader the characters as well as the language Penkov uses in his Bulgarian translation are reminiscent of those of Yordan Yovkov (1880–1937) and Elin Pelin (1877–1949), as well as of Nikolay Haitov (1919–2002) and Ivailo

Petrov (1923–2005), who wrote in a similar style.⁹ Penkov keeps the tradition alive by presenting Bulgaria as an exotic, distant and rather quaint place. Such preference for the old-style, antiquated language and ambience is even more apparent in the Bulgarian “translation” done by Penkov of the original English text. Here the writer/translator has opted for a language that is vaguely archaic, and poetic in a folkloric way (for example „търкулнаха се пет лета“, „догдето“, etc.).¹⁰

An even more curious issue to consider in this context is how much the translation of the English text can be interpreted as a form of betrayal. Is the translator translating into his own mother-tongue a traitor? Is he being unfaithful to the original, or disloyal to the mother tongue? These questions become even more pertinent since any translator’s choice can either subvert or enhance the meaning of the original written in the ‘step-mother’ tongue. The act of translation acquires in such a context a much larger social and personal significance. Penkov has translated himself “backwards”. These multiple border-crossings between languages inevitably ask to be interpreted in broader, metaphorical terms both as a self-transformative process and clearly as a creative power. But how much is Penkov’s rendition of the stories in Bulgarian an actual act of translation? Isn’t it rather a re-writing of self, an attempt to look at oneself from a distance?

Cultural Geography in Translation. In the story “East of the West” a boy meets his cousin Vera, the love of his life, once every five years at the *sbor* of their two villages. The protagonist, called Nose, lives in Bulgaria during socialism, while she lives across the river, which serves as a border between the two countries, in Yugoslavia. The river artificially, purposefully has divided their village into East and West, thus bringing to life the lasting tension typical of the Balkan region between they and we, between the Orient and the West. This village, split in two hamlets by the river as a result of the decision taken by the great powers after one of the wars that plague this land, comes to symbolize a region ridden

⁹ For more on the issue of self-exoticization of Bulgaria in texts written by contemporary Bulgarian writers see Мари Врина-Николов, „Екзотизация срещу европейскост: българското – поглед от България и от САЩ“ ЛВ, бл. 33, 17–23.10.2012 <<http://litvestnik.wordpress.com/2012/10/21>> Accessed January 2013.

¹⁰ Consider for example the style of the following comic portrayal of the “vehicle” and driver carrying the Bulgarians across the river into Serbia for the *sbor*:

Ей така я прекосявахме: Бумтене над водата и кълбета дим. Михалаки пристига на своята лодка. Лодката е славна. Не лодка, ами сал с мотор. В единия му край Михалаки е заковал седалката на стар москвич, а после я е тапицирал с козя кожа. С косьма навън. На черни и бели петна и с мъничко кафяво. Ето го, седи на трона си – спокоен, страховит. Смуче лула с абаносов мундшук, а дългата му бяла коса се вее подире му като байрак. (Пенков 2012: 31)

by conflict and strife, where the metaphors for Bulgaria as lying at the crossroads of continents, as Europe's backyard, or alternatively as the gates leading to the Orient are rife with cultural interpretations.

This story brings to the fore the issue of liminality and identity in the context of the problematic inbetweenness of Bulgaria. It has often been at the mercy of its geopolitical location and historical circumstance. From a postcolonial perspective the country has been colonized economically, politically and culturally by powerful empires. This becomes apparent when one considers how Bulgaria has often been marginalized within a larger empirical power: the Ottoman Empire for five centuries up to the second half of the 19th century; the USSR for nearly 50 years up to 1989; and, currently, the European Union – a much more recent repositioning. Bulgaria has been alternatively construed as a province, a satellite state of the former Soviet Union, or the poorest country on the fringes of Europe. Only recently has the process of the “Europeanization” of Bulgaria been completed, but only by officially acknowledging in political, if not yet in any other terms its belonging to Europe.¹¹

The characters in the story try to preserve some kind of cohesive personal history in contrast to the back-and-forth, ever-changing story of their homeland. Unfortunately, they fail to a great extent as is illustrated in the fate of the protagonist's sister, Elitsa, who is shot by border control after crossing the river to the West to be with the one she loves. In the title story, as elsewhere in the collection there is a notable ambivalence in the attitude to the West, and especially to the urge to move ‘there.’ The drive towards the West is often associated with disease, madness, obsession and death, as when the protagonist of “Buying Lenin” confesses that he has become infected with “the rabies of the West” (2011: 55), while his grandfather compares the English language to a rabid dog that will easily poison his grandson's mind (2011: 56). The narrator himself feels that the words of the English language he was trying to master, “tormented [me] like a rash” (2011:62). At the same time the West is presented as a mythical land of freedom where life will be different, symbolized for Nose by the worn-out pair of jeans he buys from Vera: “I liked how loose they were around my waist, how much space, how much Western freedom they provided around my legs” (2011: 35).

But the East, too, is not conceptualized in a straightforward way. It is the place where the home is, both full of passion, love, emotion, but tormenting as an open fire. In “Buying Lenin” “the east blazes red” and that refers not only to the sun rising in the sky (2011:68). In a similar way during Elitsa's and her beloved's funeral on both sides of the river, “the banks came alive with fire, two

¹¹ For an analysis of this process see Владимир Трендафилов, „Кризата, която обнадеждава: наследството от европеизацията.“ *Култура*. Брой 2 (2485), 18 януари 2008 <<http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/13732>> Accessed February 2010

hands of fire that could not come together. Between those hands was the river” (2011: 43). The East, however, is also where you have no future, no life. The final advice that Nose’s father gives him is to leave, to go West, because the land of the East is a bitch. He admonishes: “and you can’t expect anything good from a bitch” (2011: 46).

The village torn in half by the border comes to signify the state of passing over, of crossing on to the other side, while the river itself serves as the symbol of the (im)penetrability and transmutability of borders. The river is a fluid, flowing boundary that has been moved at the will of people, thus emphasizing the fact that all boundaries are relative, artificial constructs. In the story the characters undertake multiple crossings of the river often by swimming to the other side, and, sometimes, on a raft – probably reminding the reader of Huckleberry Finn’s failed quest for freedom and the urge to escape from the corrupting influence of civilization into a state of innocence in the wilderness.

The river, too, is not an unequivocal symbol of freedom, of the escape route to the West. Even if it were to stand for liberty, “people can’t live in rivers” Vera tells Nose during one of their nightly rendezvous in the moonlit no-man’s waters (2011: 40). The river is the site of impossible love-seeking and love-making, the site of the drowned church, of submerged faith. It is most significantly the “spineless, muddy thief” (2011: 44) that takes away not only your family and loved ones, but all you believe in, the sense of meaning. A direct reference to the unsustainability of all artificial disunions and separations of people and land is the paraphrase of several lines from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 1, Verse 5 incorporated in Penkov’s story:

One generation passes away [...] and another comes; but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind goes toward the West, toward Serbia, and all the rivers run away, East of the West. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. Nothing is new under the sun.

Penkov 2011: 43

This “nothing-is-new-under-the-sun” quote is linked intertextually to one of the great novels of the lost generation, *The Sun Also Rises*, which uses the same lines from Ecclesiastes as an epigraph to express a similar idea.

It is the river as borderline that can steal away your identity. It does so for Vera, who asks Nose whether she can be categorized as a hundred percent Serbian, since she is of Bulgarian descent, but lives in the state of Yugoslavia. Understanding her confusion and pain, Nose comes to realize that “she had nice shoes, and jeans, and could listen to bands from the West, but I owned something that had been taken away from her forever” (2011: 33). All borders, the river being one, are eventually experienced as an aberration by Nose. When he learns

of the inevitable disintegration of Yugoslavia following the death of Josip Tito, the image that comes to his mind is that of the body of Frankenstein. Borders are lines of suturing and rupture, and the state, any state is “a monster sewn together from the legs and arms and torso of different people” (2011: 39) and can easily fall apart.

Finally, Nose succeeds in going West, but, most importantly, he discovers the real meaning of freedom. He provides the answer by repeating the same question previously posited, only now rhetorically rephrased: “Who binds a man to land or water, I wonder, if not that man himself?” (2011: 52) After attempting to write his own life into that of his characters, to reimagine the plight of the migrant crossing that river, Penkov contests that East and West are not only geographical locations, but more significantly they are figments of the imagination.

Conclusion. The position of the voluntary (im)/migrant today is very different from that of the exile and the refugee. The world has become globalized, allowing for constant mobility – a cosmopolitan nomadism, requiring a constant reconsideration and renegotiation of cultural relations. Yet, even though “the psychological trajectory of immigration is now very different” (Hoffman 2011: 340), the (im)/migrant still undergoes a culture shock, an identity crisis, what Hoffman calls a “cultural schizophrenia” (2011: 211). This is a dynamic process, which may often lead to the attitude of self-estrangement, variously called a “contrapuntal awareness” (Said)¹² and a “stereoscopic vision” (Rushdie 1991:11). Bhabha interprets this condition of hybridity of the “translational transnational” (1990: 173) as an empowering one. It may be a traumatic experience, but it is also a position of privilege because it offers new vantage points of looking critically inward to who you are, where you come from and who you want to become.

It is precisely this experience that helps Penkov gain a twofold perspective of the world. The totalizing vantage point of a person coming from an ex-communist, ex-totalitarian Balkan state is seriously undermined. Penkov blithely overcomes the tension between the source language and the target languages. He manages to remain as faithful as possible to his mother tongue by reproducing its heterogeneity both in the English and Bulgarian versions of the text. Penkov is able to reach a new understanding of self and other and to articulate this new-found understanding in two languages.

¹² See E. Said. “Reflections on Exile”. In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

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