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"East of the West: A Country in Stories": The Interplay of Identity and Exoticism in the Short Stories of Miroslav Penkov"

Summary: This essay focuses upon a set of questions that arise from the subtitle of MiroslavPenkov's collection of short stories, *East of the West: A Country in Stories* (2011): what does it mean to claim that 'a country' can be found in a collection of stories? What kinds of cultural and historical knowledge do the stories convey through their representations of specific situations, persons, and motivations? How do representations of a country offered in a powerful foreign language enable and constrain understanding of the formal trajectories of the stories as well as the underlying referential gestures to a particular geopolitical space, to highly particularized cultural and historical contexts? How is the narrative voice itself, as realized in each story, created out of the evocation (overt or tonal) of memory, longing, and humor? Penkov offers a complex and compelling performance of one writer's inhabitation of two cultures, languages, and literary traditions in this, his first published collection.His familiarity with both Bulgaria and the States enables him to play upon, without blindly assuming, the position of mediator and translator.

Keywords: MiroslavPenkov, Bulgarian-American fiction, postcoloniality, exoticism

> "I know that Elli wants to call her mother and tell her all about the rain and the tornado. Thank God there's no reception. But what about my mother? There are no tornadoes in Bulgaria, and that's a fact, so surely she'll fail to understand me. But I can try to make her *feel* at least. How cold the wind was, how shiny the feathers of the crows. It's true, she hasn't seen the Texas sky, but I have seen it. It's true her hair was never soaked with Texas rain, but mine is dripping rivers. She doesn't need her eyes to see my world. Neither do I to see the things she sees." – Penkov, "Devshirmeh"

MiroslavPenkov, an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of North Texas, offers a complex and compelling performance of one writer's inhabitation of two cultures, languages, and literary traditions in his first published collection of short stories. Penkov's award-winning collection, *East of the West*(2011), examines points of tension across time and borders as these manifest in the lives of characters grappling with principles and presuppositions as well as with the exigencies of everyday life.

Penkov's stories, of course, construct the Bulgaria they describe, textual representations of a complex reality. In his subtitle, "A Country in Stories," Penkov makes a representational claim about the stories in the collection, and the stories themselves delve deeply into the relationship between narrative voice, audience, the familiar and the strange. This essay focuses upon a set of questions that arise from the subtitle and stand both with and against the narrative pleasure to be derived from the formal elegance of the stories: what does it mean to claim that 'a country' can be found in a collection of stories? What kinds of cultural and historical knowledge dothese stories convey through their representations of specific situations, persons, and motivations? How do representations of a country offered in a powerful, globally pervasive foreign language (and presented within the publishing and distribution mechanisms promoted by, and promoting, the latter) enable and constrain understanding of the formal trajectories of the stories as well as the underlying referential gestures to a particular geopolitical space, to highly particularized cultural and historical contexts? How is the narrative voice itself, as realized in each story, created out of the evocation (overt or tonal) of memory, longing, and humor?[i]

Penkov's stories examine the interweaving of identity, memory,alienation and otherness through the creation of distinctive narrative voices– complex, ambiguous literary constructs, evocative and memorable, that avoid the pitfall of serving as flattened signs for stereotyped moments in Bulgarian history, reified positions across the political spectrum or iconic exemplars of moral virtues or failings. In the second part of this essay, I will situate Penkov as a Bulgarian-American author whose representations of Bulgarian characters and settings inevitably engage with elements of the exotic, in self-reflective, ironized ways that open avenues to deeper engagement with the specificity of a geocultural locale. Here, I pause only to note that even as Penkov's prose brings closewhat is otherwise, in silence, inaccessible, it pushes the referent thus textuallyrepresented further away, interposing a new thing, a new discourse, that must in turn be interpreted, that will in itself generate new prose, new distance, as well as new

understandings and connections. One cannot 'punch through' writing to the object that writing attempts to grasp; writing itself throws the fine veil of the comprehensible over the Real that exceeds its representation.[ii]

Although Penkov repeatedly draws upon images of relatedness (consanguinity or 'blood') as the force that enables shared understanding across the distances of time and space, the very fact that he is *writing,*and in *English*– and to primary audiences unlikely to know much about the history and culture of Bulgaria –asserts a commitment to narrative story-telling as valuable precisely because itis capable of eliciting imaginative sympathy and inculcating a degree of 'understanding' across cultural difference and chronological/geological distances. Increasing apprehension of at least some limited part of another's story is a key element in the content of several of the stories in the collection as well as an underlying element, both asserted and problematized, across the stories as a whole, as a 'collection' that makes up a 'country in stories.'[iii]

An exoticizing claim that 'blood' binds people into a community of mutual understanding recurs throughout the stories. The effect of this claim, however, is to ironically undermine the essentialized construction of the intuitively connected community. As it turns out, in story after story, shared understanding does not easily occur, and communication is fraught with misunderstandings. Penkov's stories posit, rather than an essentialized common culture, a complicated, wry affection for a culture and a history that are not well-known, easily apprehended, or widely understood.[iv]

A Country in Stories

The eight stories in Penkov's collection thematize conflicts of identity, aligning internal anguish, confusion, anger or regret with external socio-political transformations that serve as necessary but insufficient causes of subjective dislocations. In each story, characters *tell stories* to themselves and to one another in attempts to bridge differences. Each story as a formal device provides characters '*speaking toward understanding*' themselves and others within the context of this dislocation. I would like here, quickly, to explore some of the conflicts that occurwithin and between characters and across which the plots unfold. What follows is an overview of the stories in the collection.

In "Makedonija," an aging man juxtaposes his understanding of his own life with the imagined life of the long-dead soldier whose love letters to his wife he finds among her things.In "East of the West," a narrator whose early life is shaped by the fact that his village is divided between east and west (Serbian west of the river; Bulgarian east of the river), struggles to break free of the past (both his love for a Serbian cousin and a family history scarred by losses resulting from the immediate and tangible fact, for him and his family and fellow villagers, of the militarized divide between east and west). In "Buying Lenin," the divisions take the form of both physical distance and generational distance, and the resolution unfolds through a reaffirmation of connection despite serious differences of perspective and values. The story explores with compassion and irony the tension between Communist nostalgia and capitalist globalization. It is organized around a dialogue between a grandfather, through whom Penkov explores the appeal of an idealized past (that no matter what its failures opened the door to a compelling utopian vision of an egalitarian, emancipated and enlightened society) and an immigrant grandson, who with increasing critical nuance gauges the attractions of a capitalist society (whatever its flaws) that offershim opportunities for education and employment, security, and relative material abundance. The fact that the narrator lands in Arkansas, a relatively obscure part of the U.S., for his undergraduate career in the States (rather than in a more glamorous location) and that the reconciliation that eventually occurs is mediated by international telephone calls and anEbay sale made from Moscow destabilizes easy polarizations of East and West. Similarly, "A Picture with Yuki" explores a tangle of 'others': a Bulgarian immigrant to the States and his Japanese wife, visiting Bulgaria in part to access inexpensive medical fertility treatment, visit his family's old village, encountering Bulgarian residents as well as Roma, with complicated results that are never entirely resolved within the story.

Two stories, "The Letter" and "Cross Thieves," focus upon young narrators struggling to survive in a chaotic post-socialist Sofia, in which guiding values (either socialist or western democratic) are seemingly inaccessible. The 16-year-old narrator of "The Letter" mimics the adults in her life as she balances affection for a brain-damaged twin sister with the immediate material gratifications of "1000 green." "Cross Thieves" focuses upon a moment in the life of a young man whose phenomenal, photographic memory had once seemed to promise a life of education and privilege but who, in post-socialist Sofia, has become a sideshow freak exhibited by a father who had hoped the boy's gifts would provide much more. The interplay of memory and Rado's inability to comprehend the images he readily recalls structure the story, which culminates with an attempted theft of a gold cross (actually wood) on the

eve of an election in the tumultuous ’90s. These stories do not locate their narrators as torn between identifiable ideological positions so much as in free fall between all positions.

“The Night Horizon” explores identity and the significance of names. Sameness and otherness are not a matter of crossing national borders but of differences within the nation. The narrator, a young girl given a male name by her father, in memory (as she eventually discovers) of her dead brother, experiences the trauma of the forced renaming of Turkish Bulgarians, of the loss (presumably imprisonment) of her father and the death of her mother. The story culminates not in any sort of reconciliation but in violence she instigates, and which is apprehended, by her, through myth, the clash of titanic forces of good and evil.

“Devshirmeh,” the last and longest story in the collection, juxtaposes two narratives – the tale of a Bulgarian immigrant to the States who follows his ex-wife and daughter to Texas to be near the daughter, and the embedded Bulgarian folktale he tells his daughter abouthis “great grandmother,” the “most beautiful woman in the world,” whose love for a janissary sent to bring her to the Ottoman sultan results, ultimately, in both tragedy and transcendence.Through the interwoven stories, the narrator struggles to understand his place in a country and culture not his own, in which he has voluntarily but increasingly unhappily found himself, and in which he figures his life as a self-enforced exile, strongly marked by a bitter, jealous hatred of everyone around him who has what he perceived to be a better, happier life. The climax occurs across theconvergence of two catastrophes: a Texas tornado, witnessed at close hand by the narrator, his young daughter and his American friend (a mild, melancholy, alcoholic Vietnam vet) on whose genial charity he is living, and the near-death of Ali Ibrahim, the janissary of the folktale, and the abduction of his beloved. The arrival of the storm and of Ottoman troops are similarly figured and occur adjacently in the text. The two acts of witness – by the characters within the story caught up in the storm they had hoped to flee and by the audience ‘hearing’ the folktale – are structurally parallel. The coherence of the storytelling device breaks down in the aftermath of the storm, and the short story concludes not in Texas but with the folktale, as Ali Ibrahim’s spectral mother (whom he apparently killed at some point in the course of the forced conversions he administered in Bulgarian villages, and who has haunted him throughout the tale) emerges from a sentient nature, in the wake of the abduction of his beloved, to care for him and his baby daughter.

In a moment of meta-reflective critique upon the possibilities and limits of fiction, theprotagonist of “Devshirmeh” questions his ability to convey his experience of the tornado to family members in Bulgaria who have never known tornados. Just as, earlier, he states his certainty that his daughter will ‘understand Bulgaria’ through the traditional tales he tells her because she shares his ‘blood,’ here, he makes a similar claim about his mother’s ability to feel what he feels as he describes it to her. “My blood runs in her veins and hers in mine. Blood will make us see.” Although the narrator asserts the necessity of ‘blood,’ the story itself suggests that empathetic understanding and the imaginative recreation of unfamiliar cultures, concepts, landscapes and circumstances has more to do with the expressive and receptive capacities of writer and audience.

The eight stories in the collection represent, complicate, and provide varying degrees of reconciliation and narrative closure for conflicts between and within characters represented as Bulgarian. Each story unfolds through the establishment of conflicting positions that the central narrator must attempt to occupy through reconciliation or renunciation. The tension established between the pull of identity (what I am), the pull of yearning (what I remember being, what I want to again be), and difference (what I am not and cannot be) works itself out in ambiguous resolution in story after story.

Telling Stories, Bridging Differences: Writing in English about Bulgaria

Penkov’s stories pose questions about the apprehension of cultural difference, about identity and exoticism.What forms of representation reach compellingly and accurately across distances of time and space to result in the sharp, immediate apprehension of ‘truth’? Whose truth? And how do we know?The voices and perspectives of Penkov’s narrators have (of necessity) no ‘immediate’ relationship with their audiences. The narrators speak across historical, cultural and geographic divides, within complexly shared languages. The representations of Bulgarian people and places his fiction provides are partial, shaped fragments of an inescapably, unfigurably complex reality beyond the grasp of any form of textual containment. In exploring Penkov’s project, I will look first at his own location as a Bulgarian-American writer and academic, then at some of the implications of his choice of English as the medium for his stories, and lastly at the ways in which his Bulgarian stories use, complicate, resist and enrich the trope of the exotic.

The tangible, concrete experience of removal from one country to another provides a critical context for Penkov's own position within and beyond the stories – and yet, as he points out, his story is not that of a typical recent immigrant who, upon arrival in a foreign country, must sever close and recurrent ties to home. Penkov arrived in the States on an educational scholarship (in fact, a 'full ride,' including airfare), and has maintained close connections with Bulgaria. His position as a successful young writer with a tenure-track job in creative writing at The University of North Texas in the United States has not required him to relinquish one identity for another, but to play between them, keeping them in productive dialogue.

Penkov arrived in the States from Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2001, nine days before he turned nineteen, on a generous undergraduate scholarship to the University of Arkansas, from which he received a B.A. in psychology. He subsequently completed his M.F.A. in creative writing, also at the University of Arkansas, and is now an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of North Texas and editor of *The American Literary Review*. Penkovretains Bulgarian citizenship, living and working in the States as a resident alien.[v]His familiarity with both Bulgaria and the States enables him to assume, with considerable critical awareness, the position of cultural mediator and translator. He crosses boundaries readily (in fiction as in fact: he resides in the university town of Denton, Texas, and spends summers and winter holidays in Bulgaria). Penkov's representation of the motivation for his creative work combines a desire to reach out with a desire to return: "I wanted people to listen and be moved by our tales... Writing about Bulgaria was the only way I knew that would get me back to Bulgaria – not just my family, whom I miss greatly, but also our muddy village roads, black fields, blue mountains…." (http://miroslavpenkov.com/intro.hmtl)

Penkov describes himself as indebted to American popular novelists such as Stephen King as well as to the Bulgarian mentors who believed in him as a young writer (http://miroslavpenkov.com/blog/?p=102). He claims to have found 'his voice' in ceasing to write imitative fiction, returning to his own memories and to the stories his mother and father told him. As a result, the impetus for his first published collection is figured as emerging from faceted representations of a recalled, imagined Bulgaria, and from the dramatic possibilities inherent within the complexity of intercultural communication. The stories thematize the ever-uncertain possibilitythat attentive, well-disposed reader/listeners may develop sympathetic understanding, cross-cultural empathy, that a narrator speaking across two worlds can create bridges through the stories he tells.

At the same time, the malleability of Bulgarian history provokes an ethical challenge for fictional representation about which he is well aware – if there is no 'truth' in historical representations, compelling versions of history do powerful work in the world. In the course of an interview in the Dallas Observer, Penkov reflects upon creative work – first, as a means of self-understanding through the exploration of a personal and cultural past, then as capable of taking 'history' as the material for textual reweaving (the 'truth' of history being inaccessible) and finally, as the locus of ethical reflection upon the uses of historical representation, in the various genres of historical retelling as in story: ['being free to spin whatever tale' is] also very dangerous. That happens, where a group of people take some occurrence in history and twist it or take it out of context and use it for their own purposes. It's not just a beautiful poetic notion, but it can also be a very dangerous thing to do." (*Dallas Observer* interview)[vi]

Penkov's stories were originally written in English (initial distribution of the collection occurred in the States, Canada and the United Kingdom).[vii] Even when the narrators of particular stories speak to family members and friends in Bulgaria, the stories as a collection presupposean Anglophone audience. Even more particularly, Penkov weaves representations of the United States into a number of his stories, drawing upon his experiences in the States as an image-trove for his fiction. Penkov, writing in English about Bulgaria, acquires as an audience for his fiction a nation largely composed of immigrants whose first language is English (if it is English) by the overdeterminedaccident of successful British colonization.

> "I never really lost any connections in Bulgaria with people, with the place. Up until now, when the book came out and reviewers are calling me an immigrant, I never really thought of myself as an immigrant. Which I imagine is the correct word. But nowadays it's very different from how it used to be when people left and never looked back."[viii]

Although the Bulgarian and the States-side characters are 'other' to each other, English-language readers are (typically) likely to be less distant from the States-side contexts than from the Bulgarian contexts. 'Exoticization' occurs in the representation of Bulgarian landscapes and characters, however resistant or self-aware Penkov's authorial strategies.[ix]This flattening of specificity and use of generalization as narrative shorthand is equally true of the representation of the flat, tornado-prone plains of Texas and of the character of 'the Vietnam vet.' The construction of the United States in Penkov's work is composed of snapshots of particular places, localized representations rather than wide generalizations about a 'nation' as a whole – New York (in fact, the Bronx), Chicago (fleetingly, as a grim urban landscape of work, rain and wind), a university town in Arkansas, and the Texas plains (presumably the Panhandle area rather than the coastal or mountainous regions of Texas). Penkov does not essentialize the United States, much less 'the West,' just as his narratives problematize and particularize people and places in Bulgaria, carefully locating the characters in highly specific times and places – in a rest-home near Sofia, at the foot of Vitosha Mountain, in 1968, 50+ years after the Balkan wars of 1912-13, in 1943, in a village from which communist partisan fighters are recruited and in which their executed bodies are displayed, on the border of Bulgaria and Serbia in the 1970s, in city center Sofia in the 1990s, in a Bulgarian town in 2006, in a Sofia suburb and market-reform-resistant agricultural village in the 1990s, in a village in which Roma have begun to settle not far from Sofia in the mid-2000s, in the tobacco-growing areas of the eastern Rhodope mountains, in southern Bulgaria, around 1984, at the time of the forcible assimilation campaign of ethnic Turks and Pomoks conducted by the communist party.

> "… I also did an inversion of the idea that many Americans have, of Eastern Europe, for example. To me, the whole concept of "Eastern Europe" means nothing. Bulgaria and Serbia are as different as they can be, and then you add Greece or Romania, so I was just poking fun at the idea of the outside, the otherness, as a uniform entity." (*Dallas Observer* interview)

Penvko's stories do not provide a window upon the 'truth' of Bulgaria. That's not the work the stories perform. Penkov's fictional representations of Bulgarian characters, places, and situations is a performance of intercultural mediation; thecontextualization of difference that occurs repeatedly in his fiction destabilizesstereotyped representations of 'Eastern Europe.'[x]Although the short-fiction device of the telling 'snapshot,' the evocative phrase, the useful generalization, of necessity contributes to the construction of character and the representation of place in the stories, Penkov foregrounds in each the specificity of particular moments of Bulgaria's complex past and present: changes of national borders, wars, patterns of ethnic mixing and conflict, massive shifts in governing ideologies, economic and social trauma.

The titular story, "East of the West," deliberately transforms the 'large' directional descriptors into local, immediately adjacent ones: "east" is the east, Bulgarian, side of a river dividing two countries and one village; "west" is the western bank of the same river, the other half of the same town, and Serbia. The resonance of 'the west' is very much of a particular historical moment – Serbia means blue jeans and western music and sneakers for reasons that can be readily traced in the circumstances of economic and cultural access, relative freedom of transaction with western European markets, and an alluring otherness (that is, a western 'otherness' to the Bulgarian speaker). "East" and "west" in this story signify a destructive, imaginal and symbolic construct that is also very real – one that destroys the narrator's sister (literally, with a rifle shot from a border guard), his mother (through grief-stricken illness), and his father (through alcoholism so severe it results in blindness and death), and that blights his own life. This narrator is unable to free himself from the chains of the "east/west" divide until, after the fall of socialism, he travels freely to Serbia, finds the apartment of the Serbian cousin who has meant youth and young love and the west to him for many years, finds that she has a child and a partner, and is at last able to let go of the past.

And exotic elements contribute to the complex construction of the narrative voice itself, the character created precisely through the use of such devices. Penkov uses a strategic exoticization to develop character in "Pictures with Yuki," wherein the narrator initially resists Yuki's interest in the village Roma and in which Yuki herself is 'exotic' to her husband's relatives (who view her with continuing suspicion, although they have come to terms with the fact of the marriage) and by the residents of the village they visit, and in "Night Horizons," in which – in complex ways – the multiply-named/nameless central character is always already eccentric and, if not exotic, grotesque (as unwanted daughter raised as son; as Turkish Bulgarian renamed by faceless bureaucrats); in the end, she sends fierce and highly personal appeals out to "the Party" via anonymous letters, followed up by the act of individual violence against an unresponsive community that closes the story. And, of course, the 'exotic' elements of the Bulgarian folktale that combines cross-cultural conflict, violence and betrayal, the supernatural, romance,

pastoral idyll, a highly stereotyped sketch of imperial, "eastern" / Turkish sovereign power, and implausible, salvific transcendence, are precisely the point of the folktale's incorporation as embedded narrative in "Devshirmeh."

The allure of the 'exotic' is undeniably highlighted in the titular proffer of stories about a land "east of the west." In this sense, his much praised first collection trades upon the strong market for 'new perspectives' by 'postcolonial' (and 'post-communist') writersupon relatively 'unknown' (to Anglophone audiences) cultures and histories.Penkov's work is a hot commodity; he is now on the lecture circuit, reading and promoting his work in the United States and beyond. At the same time, Penkov's stories work to unsettle readers seeking in exoticism anescape from mundane lives. If postcolonial exoticism emerges from casual interest in local color that requires little or no intellectual 'work' of understanding, these stories are not in this sense complacently 'exotic' and do not allow readers to rest in ignorance. The stories disrupt the expectations of casual Anglophone readers, deepening and complicating 'Bulgaria' as imaginal construct. Although the 'exotic' element persists and probably contributes significantly to the critical and commercial success of Penkov's work, the various highly specific situations, evoking socio-political contexts that require either prior knowledge or some degree of thoughtful assessment of intertextual clues regarding significance (or further research, if only into Wikipedia), make the reader 'work' at interpretive understanding. In addition, circumstances and conflicts that cross cultural borders provide ground upon which incommensurate differences and historical singularities can be gingerly approached (if not 'understood,' at least 'apprehended'). Intergenerational conflict and affection, anger at growing old, fear and regret, confrontation of scarring pain from the past, cross-cultural marriages and the work they entail, and feelings of exile or loss of purpose are transportable across cultures, shared across boundaries as discernibly 'the same' kinds of situations, conflict and emotional states(however historically and culturally specific in their moments).

In *East of the West: A Country in Stories*, Penkov*represents* Bulgaria; he highlights similarities, seeks parallels, and emphasizes metaphoric approximations, thus promoting comprehension rather allowing incomprehension to prevail. He builds bridges between two non-monolithic, internally immensely diverse cultures; he promotes understanding and attempts to mitigate ignorance. And he is engages in the creation of art, of short stories that 'work' as formal pieces of writing, compelling enough to find a publisher, to find readers, to develop an audience receptive – perhaps in ways that open them to new understandings – of the representations of otherness and sameness, of conflict and growth, pain and enlightenment, he conveys. The work of mediation and the unfolding of comprehension are never finished; each new representation leads to the possibility of new clichés, new forms of blindness, new generalizations. However, such representation is, I'd argue, usually better than silence; thoughtful, nuanced fictional inventions worth the risk.

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End Notes

[i]For an astute exploration of the ways in which post-soviet 'Eastern Europe' is created in narrative fiction through the 1990s, see Ludmilla Kostova, "Inventing Post-Wall Europe: Visions of the 'Old' Continent in Contemporary British Fiction and Drama," *Yearbook of European Studies* 15 (Beyond Boundaries: Textual Representations of European Identity, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 2000). The superb collection, *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*, ed. Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010) is indispensible to any consideration of fictional representations of 'Eastern Europe.' Two major monographs in this arena are Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) and Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization in the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994). The argument of the latter monograph is usefully supplemented and critiqued in MilicaBakic-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54 (1995): 917-931.

[ii] For an exemplary formulation of this key poststructuralist point, see Barbara Johnson, "Writing," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 39-49.

[iii]The theoretical underpinnings of this essay come from postcolonial theory, and particularly from the discussions among critics about the relationship between postcolonial theory and the post-soviet states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. See David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," PMLA 116 (Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Students) (January 2001): 111-128, and NatašaKokvačević, *Narrating Post-Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008). Also informing this discussion are the PMLA Forum contributions by GayatriChakravortySpivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram and VitalyCherntsky, "Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space," PMLA 121.3 (May 2006): 828-836, and key entries in the global cultural exchange on postcolonial theory: Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 336-57, Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Postcolonialism." *Social Text* 10 (1992): 84-98, Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), Graham Huggan, "Postcolonialism and its Discontents" (*Transition* 62 (1993): 130-135, and Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial," *Social Text* 10 (1992): 99-113.

[iv]An elegant and fierce indictment of the claim that 'blood' provides a privileged access to a particular culture or history, in the context of a nuanced, sympathetic appraisal of the claims and potentialities of postcolonial theorizing, occurs in Stephen Greenblatt, "Racial Memory and Literary History," PMLA 116 (January 2001): 48-63.

[v]MiroslavPenkov (website): http://www.miroslavpenkov.com/.

[vi]The fluidity of 'history' as human construct is intensely highlighted by the abrupt social, economic and political transition experienced by people in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia from 1989-1991, which elicited a contest of historical narratives – what happened (for example, in 1944) What does 'the past' signify and who gets to write the histories that 'count'? How do people resist the imposition of historical narratives that do not match their own understanding and allegiences? See DeemaKaneff, "Negotiating the Past in Post-Socialist Bulgaria," *EthnologiaBalkanica* 2 (1998): 31-45, and Gerald W. Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

[vii]The collection has achieved wide distribution in a variety of languages: (in Bulgarian) in Bulgaria, (in Hebrew) in Israel, as well as in German, Swedish, Spanish, Dutch, French and Italian (all foreign editions are listed, with links, on Penkov'swebsite(http://miroslavpenkov.com/abroad.html). Penvko himself translated the stories into Bulgarian for the Ciela edition, and continues to work in and across English and Bulgarian in fiction and criticism.

[viii]*The Dallas Observer*, Interview of MiroslavPenkov by Zack Schlacter (August 3, 2011) (http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/mixmaster/2011/08/unts_miroslav_penkov_discusses.php)

[ix]My understanding of the 'exotic' in the context of postcolonial theory (including critical assessments of a complacent postcolonial multiculturalism) emerges from Graham Huggan's work, as first formulated in "The Postcolonial Exotic" *Transition* 64 (1994): 22-29. Huggan's reading of The Booker Prize provides a touchstone for considerations of English-language authors situated within as well as in opposition to 'empire' (in the Hardt and Negri sense), whose works are successfully marketed 'as postcolonial' to appreciative western audiences. A valuable supplement to Huggan's work comes in the challenge posed to postcolonial theorizing about 'empire' by ZahiZalloua (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), which was helpful in shaping my understanding of the ethics of the deployment of the trope of 'difference" and of the value of attempts at representations that avoid the pitfalls of incommensurable difference (translation is impossible; nothing can be said: "India is India," in Zalloua's example of an Italian travel writer) and the embrace of assimilation (this country/culture/people is exactly like our country/culture/people; "sameness everywhere," p. 132) – see "The Future of an Ethics of Difference after Hardt and Negri's Empire," *Perennial Empires: Postcolonial, Transnational and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Chantal Zabus and Silvia Nagy-Zekmi (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2011): 120-152.

[x]Three essays in the collection *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) were particularly helpful in considering Penkov's intercultural mediations between Bulgaria and the States: "Memory and Cultural Translation," by Gabriel Motzkin (pp. 265-281), "Remarks on the Foreign (Strange) as a Figure of Cultural Ambivalence," by Renate Lachmann (pp. 282-293) and Wolfgang Iser's "Coda to the Discussion" (pp. 294-302).See also *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll and AnsgarNunning. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, particularly Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory" (pp. 109-118), Vita Fortunati and Elena Lamberti, "Cultural Memory: A European Perspective" (127-137) and Renate Lachmann, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature" (pp. 302-310).