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‘I would be nothing without you’ – Survival and Failure in Rana

Dasgupta’s *Solo* and Miroslav Penkov’s *East of the West*

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Abstract: For Margaret Atwood, survival is the central image of Canadian Literature and the victim its central character. Rana Dasgupta’s novel *Solo*, winner of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2010, and Miroslav Penkov’s story collection *East of the West* inscribe Bulgaria into a post-colonial context echoing Atwood, as they make failure and survival central concerns of their Bulgarian characters. I am going to explore how the two texts develop the notions of failure and survival not only to represent their Bulgarian protagonists or to come to terms with Bulgaria’s past, but also to unfold the buoyant energy and creativity of their characters. I shall argue that, although the narratives address key themes of post-colonial literature or literature of migration, such as home, displacement, memory or return, their characters share some peculiarities that add new turns to these issues. Penkov’s stories and Dasgupta’s novel take a critical stance towards identification via ethnicity, nation or gender; nevertheless they do not resolve essentialist assumptions with transcultural identities or nomadism. Instead, *Solo* and *East of the West* celebrate the human individual and his or her potential for survival. Accentuating the choices the characters make and whose consequences they bear despite their failures, the narratives are profoundly ethical. With this strong emphasis on ethical individualism, the two texts confront stereotypical representations which define Eastern Europe through its Communist past, where the collective was favoured over the individual, as well as an equally stereotypical notion of the chaotically diverse Balkans. Moreover, they represent ambiguous positions towards history and memory with homesick characters emphasising their blood bonds while insisting on breaking with their past (Penkov) or by juxtaposing the memory of a human being and its country with daydreams that only give a dim hint at ‘what furies and passions [...] and raw human energies are emerging out of the ruins of the collapsed Soviet Empire’¹ (Dasgupta).

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“[E]very country or culture has a simple unifying and informing symbol at its core. [...] This symbol] functions like a system of beliefs [...] which holds the country together and helps the people in it to co-operate for common ends” (Atwood, 31). In today’s theoretical climate, with its emphasis on cultural heterogeneity and diversity, its critical stance towards nation and its scepticism, if not aversion, towards essentialism, Margaret Atwood’s statement, uttered in her 1972 monograph *Survival*, appears oddly archaic. Yet Atwood was perfectly aware of the “sweeping generalization” (ibid.) she proposed, and by drawing attention to the function of these cultural symbols as well as to their systemic character, she shifts the focus away from the symbol itself to the subjects deploying it. If I am going to embark from Atwood’s reflections, I am also going to embrace this functional approach to symbols used for identification to assert the agency of identifying individuals. My paper is concerned with two case studies that reflect a transformation of concepts that are prominent in postcolonial studies for the representation of Eastern Europe. While being aware of Maria Todorova’s justified premonitions against an oversimplified equation of Eastern Europe with postcolonial states, I tend to follow critics like Dorota Kolodziejczyk, who contends that

“Eastern Europe can find in the postcolonial a repository of new articulations for itself” (160). The following paper is such an attempt to ‘reroute postcolonialism’ by drawing discursive analogies on the metaphorical level.

The two texts I am going to discuss are both set in and concerned with Bulgaria: Rana Dasgupta, born in Britain and now living in Delhi, writes in his novel *Solo* about the life, memories and daydreams of the one-hundred-year-old Bulgarian Ulrich. Miroslav Penkov’s short story collection *East of the West* presents in a panoramic view multiple facets of Bulgaria and the Bulgarians, and claims in its subtitle to render “*A Country in Stories*”. Dasgupta’s and Penkov’s narratives have in common that their protagonists’ lives are marked by survival and failure. According to Margaret Atwood, survival is the central image of Canadian Literature and the victim its central character.

Considering the significance of survival and failure in the literatures of these settler colonies, it is interesting to examine in how far these ‘symbols’ have been transformed by Dasgupta and Penkov to feature in a new ‘Eastern European’ context. In my paper, I am going to explore how the notions of failure and survival become strategies that unfold the buoyant energy and creativity of their characters as they endeavour to come to terms with the past, and construe their own identity. The connection between survival and nostalgia, which has been commented on by Dennis Walder with regard to memory cultures in Holocaust literature or literature of migration, becomes significant in this respect. Nostalgia presupposes survival. Without survival, there would be no one to remember, to grieve for (a lost) home. With their diametrically opposed orientation, nostalgia and survival can have reciprocal effects on each other: As long as the focus is placed on nostalgia, the past dominates both the present and the future; survival may become legitimate only for the sake of remembrance. If the focus is placed on survival, the time trajectory is reversed, and the present and future are foregrounded. This does not automatically eclipse the past or suppress memory and nostalgia. I shall argue that the texts discussed here emphasise survival while retaining a connection to the past; yet this connection to the past is transformed into a productive impulse whereas the paralysing effects nostalgia may take is gradually overcome. In a similar vein, while the narratives address key themes of post-colonial literature and literature of migration, such as home, displacement, memory or return, they also take a critical stance towards identification via ethnicity, nation or gender. Nevertheless they do not resolve essentialist assumptions with transcultural identities or nomadism. Instead, *Solo* and *East of the West* present what I would like to call ‘ethical individualism’ – an individualism that defines itself mostly through agency, responsibility and awareness of communal experience. As the narratives celebrate the human individual and his or her potential for survival they confront stereotypical oppositions which associate individualism with Western culture and define Eastern Europe through the “official discourse of communality” (Boym, 146) of its communist past.

The title of Rana Dasgupta’s novel already indicates that the story is going to focus on an individual who can easily be recognized as an outsider of his community. Ulrich, a resident of Bulgaria’s capital Sofia, is a complicit victim of oppressive forces throughout his life. Born the son of a Germanophile father and an Arabophile mother, Ulrich soon learns to sacrifice his own desires: he abandons his violin play at his father’s command – only to learn decades later that his father used to be a lover of music before giving his passion up to become a devout (although eventually not successful) engineer promoting a railway line from Berlin to Baghdad. Apparently Ulrich all too readily embraces the self-sacrificial victimhood inherited by his father. And indeed, for the greater part of his life, Ulrich appears to represent the first two out of four types of victimhood described by Margaret Atwood: Initially, he quietly acquiesces to his position, denying his being oppressed. And once he recognises his victimization, he relegates it respectively to the untouchable hierarchy of the patriarchal family, the coercion of necessity, history or the Communist regime. When Ulrich’s mother, who openly revolts against the Communist government, is detained in a labour camp, he finds confirmation of an attitude he had already fostered since childhood: “Ulrich resolved to be

more circumspect in his attachments, and to surrender them when necessary. Later on, when he saw what happened to people who refused to give up their convictions, he wondered if this is why he survived so long” (Dasgupta, 20). This reflection, however, also contains the ambiguity of Ulrich’s victim status: his acquiescence allows him to survive. And while surviving and thereby retreating more and more into himself, Ulrich develops into the fourth of Atwood’s victim types, the creative non-victim, who finds agency through the release of creative energies: In his daydreams, Ulrich releases his imaginary power in a revision of his history and memories. The second part of the novel establishes a sharp contrast between the quiet acceptance of Ulrich’s official life, and his almost wild imagination of rebellious misfits in part two. Corresponding to the shifting in victim types, one can also discern a change in the mode of memory in both parts: whereas the first part of *Solo* reflects, often laconically or even ironically, on a life of desire, failure and loss, the second part envisages a quasi-utopian re-construction of possible lives for Ulrich and the people he has encountered. In the terminologies of Svetlana Boym and Dennis Walder, one could therefore identify “ironic” (Boym) or “reflective” (Walder) nostalgia in the first part of the novel, and “utopian” (Boym) or “restorative” (Walder) nostalgia in the second part (see Boym, 146 and Walder, 939-940). However, although the two parts may deploy different modes of memory, they are not entirely disconnected: Subtle, almost hidden casual remarks in the first section already hint at Ulrich’s other life, juxtaposing his daydreams with official history. One may object that Ulrich’s daydreams are nothing but a sublimation of his own repressed victim status. I would argue that Ulrich may suffer from poverty and the constant failure of his plans. Yet through all his misfortunes, he doggedly holds on to his life and develops ever new survival strategies. These strategies target his personal integrity more than his physical body: Ulrich’s chemical experiments, for instance, with their Quixotic attempt to invent plastic entirely on his own, are utterly solipsistic. They have no practical or functional purpose whatsoever except gratifying Ulrich’s self-esteem. The very fact that Ulrich indulges in these unproductive pleasures is a tacit form of escape from passive victimhood. Living his life solo in an environment that strictly interdicts such self-absorbed individualism, Ulrich retains his individuality and authenticity against all strictures from outside. Once his eyesight is destroyed by careless handling of chemical substances, Ulrich still finds a way to continue his solo: his memory and daydreams become the ultimate manifestation of his survival. He imagines success where he failed, and even breaks with the spatial point of gravitation to which his life has been bound so far, as he first chooses another Central European setting (Georgia) for his daydreams, and then a cosmopolitan expansion across the Atlantic. It is not clear in the novel, whether the second section is to be seen as one large dream indulged in after the end of Part One, or whether it is a compendium or collection of all of Ulrich’s previously mentioned daydreams into one big story. Both is possible, and both is equally irrelevant considering the fact that the daydreams first and foremost express Ulrich’s creativity, his main tool for survival. The extent of this creativity becomes clear in the final chapter, when Ulrich imagines his encounter with Boris, a violin wunderkind he dreamed in memory of his old friend Boris, who had been executed for sedition in the mid-1920s. While explaining how the imaginary Boris could cope with the suicide of his friend Irakli, Ulrich reveals his own attitude towards life and death: “He’ll find his way inside you, and you’ll carry him onward [...]. There are no more facts about him – that part is over. Now is the time for essential things [...], you’ll think he is more alive than you are” (Dasgupta, 345). Ulrich’s creativity has gone so far that his characters develop lives of their own – he has long lost control over his narrative. It is not clear in the novel whether the final pages, where Ulrich bequeaths his gold watch to Boris (something he had always wished to do for a son) and sees him depart, ought to signal Ulrich’s death. Even if this be the case, Ulrich has long secured his own survival in a character who has taken on a life of his own, and who – so the novel suggests – will continue this life somewhere else, wearing Ulrich’s watch as a material token.

What has all this to do with the representation of Eastern Europe? It is certainly a curious incident that Rana Dasgupta, who grew up in the UK and is today living in Delhi, chose Bulgaria and Georgia as his settings – and not, say, India or Pakistan. This particular choice of setting has an impact on the perception and reception of the novel. Within the Commonwealth Writers' Prize list, the novel was placed – and won the 2009 award – in the “European” section. The impression which the novel left on its readers was marked by an “exceptional, astonishing strangeness” (so Salman Rushdie on the reverse book cover of my edition). Dasgupta does play the card of alterity, indeed, beginning with his protagonist's name, which renders Ulrich different even in his Bulgarian surroundings. The Sofia of the first section of the novel is a contested space, a contact zone where cultures clash rather literally in the fight for supremacy:

As the Ottoman Empire's tide retreated, Sofia found itself beached in Europe – and these men plotted to turn down their provincial Turkish town into a new European city. They studied Berlin and Paris to find out what was required, and all of it – cathedral, tramway, university, royal palace, science museum, national theatre, national assembly – they re-created faithfully in Sofia. At the entrances to the future metropolis were haystacks piled up like mountains to sustain the multitudes of horses carrying stone and steel for the new constructions, and traders and labourers swarmed over the swampy void left by everything that had been torn down. (Dasgupta, 10)

In this description at the beginning of the novel, Sofia is located in a liminal space; the Ottoman legacy is referred to as well as a potential “European” future. The ambitious plan of Ulrich's father to build a railroad from Bulgaria to Baghdad opens up the spatial context of the novel, linking Europe and Asia. For Ulrich's father, Bulgaria is a victim of the Ottoman Empire (he might have contradicted Todorova's assertions that Bulgaria has no colonial past). Repeating implicit stereotypes of the barbaric Balkans and their Ottoman legacy, he complains: “‘If only we had been conquered by the Austrians and not the Turks, we would have had some Enlightenment for ourselves,’ and Ulrich had wondered if he was talking about a kind of cake” (Dasgupta, 19). As the Iron Curtain is drawn, Bulgaria will be subject to yet another option: remaining “beached in Europe” but still segregated from it, within the Communist compound. The breakdown of Communism, finally, is described as a disconnection from Europe – and again heavily stereotypical:

Bulgaria became Asiatic again as it had been when Ulrich was born. Big-breasted Bulgarian singers embraced the long-suppressed Turkish and Arabic music and turned it into anthems for the new gangster society. Heroin poured in from Afghanistan. Criminal syndicates selected the best-looking Bulgarian girls to work in brothels in Dubai. (Dasgupta, 161)

With the war against Iraq, the dreams of a harmonious link between Western Europe and the East are ultimately shattered. I have mentioned “the East” deliberately here, because Dasgupta's novel appears to endorse a distinction between West and East rather than differentiating between different parts of Europe vs. Asia Minor. In this geography, Bulgaria becomes liminal; its belonging to Europe is a fluid affair – and it never seems to be properly European. Like Ulrich, Bulgaria becomes a victim of greater forces – of history, world politics, communism, capitalism. Unlike Ulrich, however, Bulgaria is not endowed with a vital agency by Dasgupta; instead, the country allows itself to be fully victimized. It becomes “a chemical disaster” (Dasgupta, 159), its environment suffering (although not dying!) from years of industrial wreckage, pollution and ecological carelessness. Politics seem to be dominated by criminals who are fiercely struggling for who are the fittest to survive.

He never had an instinct for politics, and now he could not even tell what kind of world he was in. They said, Now we are capitalist! but all Ulrich could see was criminality raised to a principle. Murderers and thieves took over and called themselves businessmen, and kept the people happy with pornography. The United Nations cut off supplies to Milosevic's Serbia, and gleeful thick-necked Bulgarian toughs stepped in to supply the food and oil, becoming billionaires overnight. They bought TV stations, hotels and football clubs, and they adorned those necks with gold crosses the size of dinner plates.

They were former sportsmen and State Security men, and they had manoeuvred well through the decade, but even they could not believe how many millions they had managed to steal. For a time they lived out in the open, and everyone could see their incredulous carnival; but then they began to die in daylight assassinations, and they retreated behind walls. (Dasgupta, 161)

From this Bulgaria, Ulrich cannot derive any ground for identification. This Bulgaria is too unstable, and too unpleasant to provide a home to identify with. Even in his daydreams, Ulrich cannot imagine a Bulgarian community worth connecting to: the image of Bulgaria in the second part of the novel draws on the exotic flavour of Balkan barbarism. Plastic Munari, the cosmopolitan music producer, an expatriate Bulgarian now living in New York (and collecting art and furniture from all over 'old' Europe), is approached by two representatives of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture who seek to stem the tide of emigration by asking representatives from the West to mastermind new national symbols: "The past is a disaster. We have to make the future. [...]. The Ministry of Culture has employed an American PR firm to send out positive images of Bulgaria. We pay CNN and BBC to make nice articles about Bulgarian wine and sunshine destinations..." (Dasgupta, 246). Their chief strategy is "to make a global superstar from Bulgaria" (Dasgupta, 247). The plausibility for this goal is explained with Bulgaria's Ottoman legacy, which now surfaces not as a reason for chaos and backwardness, but for a rich multiculturalism that was suffocated under Communist nation building: "For five centuries our country was part of the Turkish Empire, full of every kind of music. Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Serbian, Gypsy. Then the communists banned everything. They sent expert musicologists to make police reports about musicians who used un-Bulgarian chords. Pop stars adored all over Bulgaria were taken to the camps for singing American songs..." (ibid.). As Ulrich dreams on, Plastic will find his superstar in Boris, but for the reader, the story will unfold the plethora of Bulgarian stereotypes: Bulgaria is to Plastic an unknown country, and his only notion about it is "that it wasn't much fun to live there" (Dasgupta, 249). His Bulgarian contacts are more interested in sex than music, Sofia is a town with old houses with fastened shutters, "defunct shops", graffiti on walls and museums exhibiting facsimiles (Dasgupta, 250-251). When Boris is finally introduced to the United States, a journalist sums up his idea of the East in the following question: "It's a very tragic place, isn't it? The Balkans?" (Dasgupta, 282). There is, in other words, no place for Ulrich to take recourse to as a home – he is utterly thrown unto himself and his devices for survival. Therefore, the only nostalgic mode at hand for him seems to be the ironic reflection on loss. When Ulrich nevertheless resorts to the utopian, restorative mode, he has no fixed image of a nation to reconstruct in mind but must resort to other objects. Ulrich's way of remembering eventually is to admit and re-construct his life as a failure: he had to drop music, discontinue his studies, his marriage broke, he lost touch with his son, he could not protect his mother from labour camp, he had to fight poverty and yield his home again and again, and when he had accomplished his one feat – to spy for the government by informing against his boss – he learns that, on account of his act, his boss was promoted, whereas he himself has to stay on, with a boss who does not respect his work. In face of all these failures, Ulrich develops a

memory based on the one remarkable moment in his life, when he chanced to encounter Albert Einstein during his studies at Berlin:

‘One day I was walking behind him in a corridor and he dropped a sheaf of papers. He didn’t notice he’d lost them, so I picked them up and raced after him. I handed them over and he looked at me, smiled and said, I would be nothing without you.’

The old man gives Boris a look.

‘What did he mean, he would be nothing without me? It seemed so personal, the way he said it. It seemed like a divine verdict. In those days, I had such an opinion of the man that there had to be greatness in his words even if he was only talking about a few missing papers. I would be nothing without you. I had a hopeful ego in those days: I tried to think of something I had done that could have contributed to Einstein’s achievement. I assumed that a great success such as his must be fed by many smaller successes all around. Perhaps I was part of this blessed orbit, I thought, perhaps I would grow to unfold exploits and discoveries of my own.’ (Dasgupta, 346)

Over the years of failure and survival, Ulrich has now developed a new narrative around the enigmatic sentence. Contrary to his previous idea that Einstein’s halo of success also affected those around him, he now believes that Einstein

was surrounded by failure. The people close to him were blocked up and cut off. Their lives were subdued, and they were prevented from doing what they hoped to do.

‘And that is exactly the point. That’s how he could make such unnatural breakthroughs. Do you see? [...] How many stopped-up men and women does it take to produce one Einstein? [...] We can’t answer questions like that; they are simply too mysterious. But we know that if we are to feel the thrill of progress and achievement, there have to be sacrifices elsewhere.’

[...] So this is what Einstein meant when he looked me in the eye that day and said, I would be nothing without you. It was not success he saw written in my face. He saw, rather, that I would never accomplish anything at all. (Dasgupta, 347)

I would argue that Ulrich’s affirmation of failure is only on the surface an acknowledgement of his victim status by relegating responsibility to some grand law of nature. Pronounced within the larger narrative of Ulrich’s daydreams, it forms part of Ulrich’s own creativity – and he achieves here an extreme degree of self-awareness and self-reflection, imagining himself in different stages of recognition (after all, is interlocutor Boris, is totally disinterested). Despite his seeming inertia and passiveness, Ulrich therefore comes to embody a kind of authentic individualism that is, according to Christoph Houswitschka, becoming a prominent pattern in contemporary life narratives. Drawing on Charles Taylor Houswitschka proposes in his article on “The Individual and Cosmopolitan Europe in Contemporary British and Irish Novels”: “Most Europeans see themselves in the ‘age of authenticity’ (Taylor), a period of individual self-fulfilment. The underlying hope of this attitude could be called a European dream of individual freedom and cosmopolitanism” (215). In contemporary fiction, this European Dream is manifest in a “shift from recognizing the collective identity of people to protecting their individual rights” (Houswitschka, 216), resulting in new patterns for narratives on constructions of a self.

With regard to Dasgupta’s *Solo*, one can say that the narrative of survival and failure serves to highlight the choices and acts of the individual Ulrich. Unlike Atwood’s concept of the terms, survival and failure do not inscribe the

protagonist into a collective of Bulgarian identity. This would be possible, because Bulgarian history, too, is described in such terms. Yet Ulrich's life is, as the title says, a "Solo". An outsider, withdrawn and later withdrawing from the collective, Ulrich's continuous yielding and acquiescence form his strategy of survival. In the end, he can retain his authenticity throughout all the changes in history; his identity achieves some stability of sorts – even if this stability is manifest in an interior cosmopolitanism, full of rioting, rebellious characters. With his daydreams, Ulrich asserts his individuality against the claims of the various collective identities his country is taking on. Positing this stable personal identity against a flux of dissolving and reconstructed identities of Bulgaria, Dasgupta's novel is clearly a swansong of identity through nation or ethnicity. If there is a sense of belonging in the novel, it is established between individuals, and if this exchange is not possible, an individual can still survive, by construing his/her own authentic life story. In short, Rana Dasgupta, the British-Indian novelist, wrote a novel about one century of Bulgarian history, to ultimately celebrate the free, authentic individual. Critical voices could say this is a Western look at Eastern Europe, which chastises the Communist legacy, exults the Ottoman one, while all cherishing the Western concept of the private individual. Above all, Eastern Europe, in the novel, becomes an impediment for the true unfolding of the individual. Only by transforming his Eastern European memories and by detaching them from Eastern European space, can Ulrich find solace and freedom in Western spaces (such as Berlin or, to some extent, the U.S.A.).

One could, admittedly, hold this against Dasgupta's novel, although I would argue against such a narrow critique. What is interesting, however, is that one can find similar life-story patterns – of survival, authentic individualism and an ambiguous attitude or transformation of Eastern European belonging – in the short stories of Miroslav Penkov. Apparently, Bulgaria seems to be a congenial setting for authors, no matter if they have Bulgarian origins or no, to represent such patterns.

In Miroslav Penkov's short story collection *East of the West*, the Bulgarian characters have a troubled relationship to their home, past, memory, family and nation. The stories negotiate between conceptualizations of East and West as they juxtapose post-Communist Bulgaria with other stages in Bulgarian history, and by including the topic of (voluntary) emigration. A troubled relationship with Bulgaria's past is a common denominator of Penkov's protagonists, who represent different generations, genders and ethnic backgrounds. Whereas the diversity of the protagonists already makes it hard, if not impossible, to assemble the stories into one "Bulgarian" plot, the stories' handling of national identity creates an additional obstacle. All stories explicitly allude to Bulgarian history, they display a strong sense of place, and they frequently incorporate folk tales, legends, customs and rituals. The prominence of poverty, drinking, a somewhat careless attitude towards law and order, as well as a constant experience of failed hopes and almost grotesque mishaps even may evoke stereotypical images of the chaotic, somewhat primitive, if vigorous Balkans. Yet while conjuring up those images, Penkov's stories also break them, or add a new twist.

For one thing, the short stories in "East of the West" simultaneously combine nostalgia while saying farewell to nation as a basis for identification. Stories that explicitly contain tales about strong national convictions, eventually take a turn that renders nationalism highly conspicuous. In "Makedonija", love for the nation is weighed against love for a woman. And although the protagonist, a seventy-year old grumpy old resident in an old-people's home, must realize that his wife's first love was a partisan who died trying to fight for Macedonia's liberation from the Turks, he also realizes that, however heart-rending and fascinating his rival's letters to his wife had been, there was little heroism in his end, which was in effect failure. In this story, nationalist pride becomes a trap. The wish to re-establish Bulgaria's ancient borders may appear grand, but proves ultimately destructive for people. The course of

time, with its many unforeseeable turns, calls for another evaluation of past and present. The past, and with it memory, is not referred to as a stabilising factor that can provide a fixed ground for identification. It can lead to false ideals, yet on the other hand it can also help to understand the present better. For the protagonist of “Makedonija”, knowledge about the past and memory can have a curing function if one does not allow oneself to be haunted by memories, but actively engages with them – or, as his wife finally chooses, deliberately forgets.

This active engagement with memory, including deliberate refusals to remember, is also significant for most of the other stories in Penkov’s collection. In “East of the West”, a story about more or less tragically thwarted loves, the protagonist’s memory becomes *Trauerarbeit* as it were. Once he has gone through the memory of the division of his home village, the tragic death of his sister, the ensuing disintegration of his family and his own failed love for his cousin, he can free himself from his past and begin anew. The setting of the story contains a powerful spatial symbol: as a river is arbitrarily chosen to be the new border between Bulgaria and Serbia, villages lying on both sides of the river are divided, and with them, the liquid Berlin Wall arbitrarily separates families, friends and partners. But what could be seen as a powerful symbol of man’s exposure to greater forces, such as history, politics or fate (cf. also the story of the sunken church), is transformed by the villagers into a symbol of subversion: the ritualized festival of river-crossing represents the communal attempt to transcend borders. The description of the carnivalesque, riotous character of the *sbor* illustrates how individual creativity can overcome rigid national borderlines. The villagers show their inventive potential, and the energy and liveliness of these subversive little acts of liberation are juxtaposed with the violent and ultimately lethal endeavours to safeguard national borders. Nevertheless, the protagonist is first trapped between these singular breaks and his own desire for communal experience (which is largely what the *sbor* becomes). The community of the village relies on rituals and the past – and gradually, the protagonist comes to experience all these stabilizing elements as chains. “East of the West” is one of the stories in the collection that explicitly depict a shift from communal belonging to individual agency: When the protagonist tries to drown himself by diving into the river and clinging to the sunken church, his body forces him to yield to the physical urge for survival. And as the protagonist clings to his life, he arrives at his first major insight and writes to his beloved cousin Vera: “I was chained to this village and the pull of all the bones below me was impossible to escape. But now I see that these deaths were meant to set me free, to get me moving. Like links in a chain snapping, one after the other. If the church can sever its brick roots, so can I. I’m free at last, so wait for me. I’m coming as soon as I save up some cash” (Penkov, 48). The final sentence already indicates that, in fact, the protagonist has not fully learned his lesson. He is still bound to economic necessities and hesitant. His final liberation occurs after he has finally managed to visit Vera again – only to realize that she, who had sustained the narrative of their romance with letters asking him to come, has not lived her life according to nostalgic romance, but is well settled with another man. As Vera remarks that the protagonist looks “Beaten”, he suddenly realizes that his failure, his defeat, is actually necessary for his survival: “This is the last link of the chain falling. Vera and Dadan will set me free. With them, the last connection to the past is gone. Who binds a man to land or water, I wonder, if not that man himself?” (Penkov, 52). In “East of the West”, the individual must realize that he is the sovereign of his freedom, not social structures, not history. The individual’s freedom consists in the ability to detach himself from the past, or from the place called home, and thus become free for the present.

This deliberate detachment of the self from memory also reverberates in other stories in the collection: In “The Letter”, the protagonist (a female teenager who, together with her handicapped twin sister, was abandoned by her mother) finally takes a decision not to run away from home, thus breaking the spell that kept repeating that all her irresponsible acts simply betrayed her kinship with her mother. “Picture with Yuki” tells about several instances

where individuals deliberately create memory, either by shaping the past or by deciding which memory to pass on and what to forget. The petty criminal Gramps in “Cross Thieves”, who sells debris and stolen goods as historical artefacts demonstrates how easily individuals can manipulate even supposedly ‘concrete’ historical material, thus ‘making’ history. The gift of the story’s protagonist – a photographic memory – additionally allows Penkov to juxtapose memory as an empty repetition of facts with memory that can become significant because it is associated with individual experience. Again, it is the individual who determines memory (and with it, forgetting), not the other way round.

Despite this critical reflection on memory, however, one cannot draw the conclusion that memory of the past and nostalgia are entirely dispensable in Penkov’s stories. Instead, the stories offer a third option, negotiating between the reconciliation with nostalgia (which can be found in many stories embracing transnational identities) and loathing it. This option becomes obvious in the two stories, with which I want to conclude my paper: “Buying Lenin” and “Devshirmeh”. In both stories, the I-narrator is a young (or middle-aged) Bulgarian expatriate residing in the U.S. after having won in the Green Card lottery. The narrator of “Buying Lenin” indulges in constant bantering with his grandfather, an ardent admirer of Lenin who has little understanding for his grandson’s attraction by Capitalism. As the story juxtaposes East and West as two spaces representing two ideologies, the protagonist finds himself caught between his desire for individual freedom, his desire for belonging, and the scepticism towards the ideologies of a rugged individualism, which ultimately results in loneliness, and an over-emphasis of the collective which can no longer accommodate individual freedom. The key to the dark side of both East and West is ideology: while the grandfather bluntly parades Communist ideals, the protagonist identifies from the beginning the ideologies governing the U.S. (money and religion). Whereas “East of the West” (the story immediately preceding “Buying Lenin”) ends with a radical assertion of individualism, “Buying Lenin” connects the decision for individual freedom with the danger of isolation and homelessness. In his self-chosen exile, the protagonist grows homesick. Although he admits that his nostalgia by no means correlates with his true desires, his desire for belonging appears to overcome his desire for individual liberty. Traditionally, the cure for nostalgia is going home – and the grandfather accordingly advises the protagonist to do so. But in the end, the grandfather offers something else – and this cure is to reveal to his grandson a new view of ideas and ideals. In a story that cannot betray its legacy to Plato’s Parable of the Cave, the grandfather tells the protagonist how he had spent some time in a dugout, then ventured outside and realized that in the meantime the country had become ‘liberated’ by the Communist government. Told in that form, the punchline of the grandfather’s story was the salvational discovery of Communism. At the end of “Buying Lenin”, however, the grandfather adds a new ending to his tale: three years after his leaving the dugout, he returned to the spot and found that all the others had remained in the hole, died there and were now mummified. “No one had told them the war was over. No one had told them they could go. They hadn’t had the courage to walk out themselves, and so they’d starved to death” (Penkov, 73). Facing these futile deaths, the grandfather decided to “live[... his] life as though ideals really mattered. And in the end they did.” (Penkov, 74). The truth the grandfather discovered was not the idea of Communism. He realized that he must be the agent subject in his life, thus he is responsible for the success of his truth, his ideals and his own life. Therefore, the same holds true for ideals that also holds true for memory: it is the individual who makes and shapes both. It is the individual’s free choice, which ideals s/he embraces, which decisions s/he takes and how they can determine the further course of his/her life. With this experiential background, the protagonist can even sympathise to some extent with Lenin’s writings – as he recognizes in Lenin a fellow exile sharing similar experiences. In the same vein, nostalgia, longing for a home or grieving for a ‘lost’ one, become volatile. They are incorporated feelings, marked on the body through individual

experience. With this incorporation, they are detached from a particular geographical locality, but inhabit the body space of the individual. The cure for nostalgia, then, no longer lies in a reconnection with home, or nation, but in the survival strategies the individual employs.

The concluding story in the collection, “Devshirmeh”, finally illustrates that the considerations about individualism do not exclude communal thinking, either. They rather remind one of the necessity for the individual to connect and communicate. At first sight, “Devshirmeh” might appear to repudiate the previous stories, because it emphasises blood bonds so much as an identificational factor: in the frame story, the I-narrator Mikhail insists on the special connection within a family – a connection that binds his daughter to him and himself to his mother. In the story-within-the-story – a folk tale which the narrator tells his daughter to keep alive her Bulgarian heritage – the fierce Ali Ibrahim forsakes his blood bonds as he becomes a janissary for the Sultan and kills fellow Bulgarians who refuse to convert to Islam; he is haunted by the souls of the dead he killed. The narrator’s desperate attempt to retain his Bulgarian identity in the U.S., his wish to perpetuate his home culture in his daughter by speaking Bulgarian to her and telling her folk tales, and his homesickness can also be seen as tokens of the disconnected exile who feels unhomey in the new home. At a second glance, Mikhail’s nostalgia emerges to be a strategy for coping with his own personal failure. The narrator embraces nostalgia as he feels to be a victim of circumstance: bad luck, his wife’s unfaithfulness and his own hesitations serve to explain his situation. On the other hand, the story also includes successful expatriate Bulgarians – relatives of the narrator or the new husband of his ex-wife. In his struggle for survival in the new world, Mikhail identifies with the fateful victim type of Atwood’s typology, taking recourse to nostalgia in order to frame his own failure with the notion of a communal history of suffering and failure. Hence also his claim that *yad* – a strong envious, desperate feeling at one’s own failure in the face of other people’s success – is the typical Bulgarian emotion. By subjecting himself to *yad*, the narrator creates for himself an imaginary community of a nation of failures. The wrath allows him to assert his masculinity, but in fact, the emotion merely turns against himself; it does not trigger off any meaningful action, least of all change.

Similarly, the folk tale initially serves as a link to the home he misses. He even belabours a mythical telepathic connection, an eternal store of national stories that are inherited through blood, when he presents himself as the true Bulgarian heir of stories towards his already disconnected daughter: “Many have told it before and many have sung about it, but I didn’t learn it from them. I was born and I knew it. It was in the earth and in the water, in the air and in the milk of my mother. But it was not in your mother’s milk and not in your air, so you must listen now as I tell you” (Penkov, 194). With this prologue, Mikhail positions himself into the chain of oral transmission, claiming authenticity and truth. The formulaic character of his introduction, however, and the deliberate, implicit lash at his divorced wife, whom he excludes from the oral community, betray that the story can only be a fabrication. In the course of “Devshirmeh”, the narrator learns to detach himself from the past. His life is not fated, but the result of his choices. This insight is hammered into Mikhail by his friend John Martin, who makes him aware that his exile status and his life are no matters of fate, but of choice:

‘Listen Michael [...] No one made you leave the house this morning. And no one made you leave your country. Those were your choices and you should be man enough to stand behind them. You make a decision, you accept the consequences. You move on. [...] You don’t win by tripping yourself and rolling in the grass. You stay on your feet and keep on marching. The way you live, Michael, this is your future.’ (Penkov, 217)

Immediately after this exchange, Mikhail experiences an epiphany while surviving a tornado together with his daughter Ellis and John Martin. Being confronted with the uncontrollable energy of the tornado and surviving the eye of the storm by sheer luck, Mikhail becomes aware of the precariousness of life – and the ridiculousness of great human concepts such as nation or history. He realizes that two things are important: individual choice and responsibility, and relationships with other human beings. Contrary to his former assumption that blood relations are natural, indestructible and incorruptible bonds, he begins to admit that relationships, too, are a matter of choice. Even families are not held together by blood ties, but by constant communication, the exchange of experiences and shared memories. If a story is employed to strike bonds of common knowledge, heritage or experience, this bond exists not due to some intrinsic quality of the story (e.g. its language or its topic). The identificational power of the story lies in the exchange between two conversation partners, in the experience they share by telling each other a story. Penkov's short story thus radicalizes Appiah's idea of cosmopolitan conversation via travelling tales. For Appiah, shared narratives make possible communication between cultures. But whereas Appiah, too, accentuates the shared contents of such travelling tales, Penkov draws attention to the human interaction in the act of storytelling: sharing stories is the result of an individual choice (to tell and to listen) and it creates a bond between the individuals through a common experience of telling and being told. It is therefore not the story that establishes a common ground, but it is the reciprocity between individuals that keeps stories alive.

Viewed together, one can therefore say that Miroslav Penkov's short story collection takes recourse to notions of nation, history, memory, ideology and shared stories as sources that link the individual with a community, creating a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is no essentialist given in the individual, like an unconscious, uncontrollable drive. In Penkov's stories, the characters can survive because they are or become conscious agents. As individuals make nations, history, memory, ideology, and shared stories, give shape to them and detach themselves again if those items turn out to be detrimental rather than productive – as individuals do all this, the replace determined identities, like nation, ethnicity or gender, with ethical identities based on their responsible choices.

To conclude let me briefly summarize, how the two 'Bulgarian' narratives by Rana Dasgupta and Miroslav Penkov, each in its own way, reflect on the representation of Eastern Europe: With their focus on survival, both texts metaphorically inscribe themselves into an existing postcolonial discourse or rhetoric. This metaphorical use allows authors, readers and critics to reroute some postcolonial issues towards the representation of Eastern Europe without claiming colonial status for the region. The explicit foregrounding of voluntary exile in Penkov's short stories additionally underscores one of the differences between the situation of contemporary Eastern European expatriates and representatives of postcolonial diasporas. If the stories of survival to some extent offer a victim position for the respective characters, the emphasis on the characters' agency and responsibility clearly marks these Eastern European figures as different from the postcolonial subaltern. Moreover, by embracing a strong notion of ethical, or authentic individualism on the one hand, without abandoning the idea of community on the other, the narratives (especially Penkov's collection) help to dissolve traditional binary oppositions of a collective, communitarian (if not communist) East versus an individualist West. Instead, their focus on the authentic individual inscribes both narratives into a general discourse of European literature – thus overcoming the East-West divide with their focus on a concern that is common to contemporary European literature. The Bulgaria in *Solo* and *East of the West* eventually turns out to be European.

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¹ Quoted from a commentary by mayakovskaya69 on Sam Jordison's review of *Solo* in the online *Guardian Book Blog*, posted on 9 September 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/sep/07/not-booker-solo-rana-dasgupta> <2 March 2012>