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# Loss of Home and Loathing Nostalgia in the English writings of Central and Eastern European Exiles

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## Abstract:

Writers who are forced into exile by a hostile government tend to suffer from the grievances of loss and deprivation. They look back in nostalgia. After 1989 leaving Central and Eastern European homes was not only a free decision, but even an act of liberation. Leaving had not been an easy option before the Iron Curtain had come down. Changing one's language and writing in English represented this act of liberation. Creating a new memory (e. g. Eva Hoffman) and a literary persona in the language of globalization and cosmopolitanism meant to look back and to discover the new at the same time. The talk investigates this tension by reading writers who have published books about both their former home countries and their new English speaking environments. Loathing nostalgia in the creative process of writing has helped authors, such as Bulgarian Kapka Kassabova, Miroslav Penkov and Czech Jan Novak, to imagine new spaces of cosmopolitan belonging without being in denial about the places of their childhood thus redefining the concept of Eastern Europe altogether.

Keywords: nostalgia, migration, Penkov, Kassabova, Novak

Svetlana Boym introduces us to a newspaper article she read about a German couple that visited their native city of Königsberg in the 1990s and opens her study on *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) with a contemporary Russian saying. It "claims that the past has become much more unpredictable than the future" (Boym 2011: xiv).

Nostalgia, she explains, comes "from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing" and "is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy." While in the seventeenth century nostalgia was still believed to be a curable disease, it became an "incurable modern condition" in the twenty-first century. "The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia." (2001: xiv) Nostalgia has been a fiercely debated concept in recent years, because it seems to block the way to a more creative approach to coping with the past. Still, while making pain of memory politics an enduring companion of any vision of the future, the past has become such an integrative part of our concepts of the future because it was so often denied and destroyed when the utopian thinkers of the twentieth century believed to have created better worlds.

In Paul Gilroy's interpretation, nostalgia has become a symptom of the inability to mourn. Gilroy used Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's concept of Germany's post-war denial and applied it to Great Britain's post-colonial melancholia. Nostalgia prevents entire nations to construct the stranger as a part of the culture we have created:

Something bolder and more imaginative is called for. We need to be able to see how the presence of strangers, aliens, and blacks and the distinctive dynamics of Europe's imperial history have combined to shape its cultural and political habits and institutions. These historical processes have to be understood as internal to the operations of European political culture. They do not represent the constitutive outside of Europe's modern and modernist life. (Gilroy 2004: 157)

From a socialist perspective, Alastair Bonnett tries to lead the way out of this paralyzing dilemma, when he calls for a creative concept of nostalgia, altogether. In *Left in the Past Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (2011), Bonnett calls for a new stance towards nostalgia. "Gilroy's antagonism to nostalgia is indicative of the fact that the presence of loss is still an unacknowledged feature of the modern radical imagination," Bonnett suggests. According to Bonnett,

modernity is the condition of nostalgia, it provokes and shapes it. [...] Nostalgia disturbs modern life. [...] We are used to imagining nostalgic longing as akin to reverie, a moment of drooping repose. But it seems it is also a moment of creativity, of discord and danger. (10)

What does this discourse on nostalgia that developed from a turn against paralyzing post-colonial melancholia have to do with Eastern European exiles that use the English language to confront the history of post-wall Europe?

The loss of home is a deliberate one and returning home neither impossible nor a seminal chapter in an émigré's biography, rather a regular habit, as Miroslav Penkov explains in an interview:

For 10 years, I've basically been spending my summers in Bulgaria, and my winter breaks. So, I would go to the U.S., I would study for a semester and come home, stay here the whole summer and go back. 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. (dallasobserver.com)

Loathing nostalgia in this context then does not suggest a denial of the past, but rather bears in mind that "modernity is the condition of nostalgia" as Bonnet says. Nostalgia is not paralyzing the writers who are identified as Eastern Europeans by their English speaking readers.

At this point, it might be appropriate to give a provisional definition of Eastern European. Penkov makes it very clear that he never thought of himself as an Eastern European, but a Bulgarian. The variety of nations, languages and cultures that are summarized in the term Eastern European does not allow for such a generalization, he warns. On the other hand, there are quite a few traditions of perceiving Eastern Europe that are embedded in Western thought that make it difficult to work without this concept. For most Westerners today it has become a term that is associated with the fall of the Soviet Empire. It acknowledges the fact that there are specific aspects of a shared legacy of countries that did not belong to any concept of Eastern Europe in a geographical or even historical meaning, but were forced together in an Empire that lasted long enough to create a reality of its own through several generations. While before 1989 many people could not care less whether the countries behind the Iron Curtain would be Eastern or not, because they formed a menacing bloc of ideological opponents, the post-1989 perspective would quickly develop a sense of uneasiness with a term that did injustice to practically everyone who was called Eastern European while offering a nostalgic view on the past in spite of this.

In this sense, Eastern Europe becomes an aspect of nostalgia, in Bonnett's words, "presented as a field of acknowledgement, an integral aspect of the modern condition, something that is present whether or not we identify and engage it or repress and deny it." The "idea that nostalgia works within and against the present" makes loathing nostalgia an act of creativity that imagines the future by adopting a past that belonged to those who could not escape its consequences. In this sense, nostalgia does not deny the memory of the past but loathes its paralyzing effects.

Nowhere else does this appropriation from a distance become more obvious than in the change of language. "My dear Bulgaria, who I return to, always, in my thoughts," says Penkov at the end of *East of the West*, "forgive me, beautiful Bulgarian language, for telling stories in a foreign tongue, a tongue that is now sweet and close to me." (226)

Ever since Eva Hoffman it has become a common place to elaborate on the crucial role language change plays when remembering past events that took place in the former home country. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman explains that memories have to be acquired in the new language and cannot be "translated" without changing. Hoffmann's exile was a lasting one and in the times of the Cold War she could not go back regularly either. English became a new home that could not accommodate that other parallel world in the Polish language any longer. Obviously, this is not only due to the fact that her exile meant separating from her native Poland for good, but also because she was a child when her parents left.

With adults acquiring the foreign language to publish in it is much more difficult. There are few exceptions. Klaus Mann published his autobiography *Turning Point* in 1944 when he served in the US Army in English and translated it back into German after the war. Arthur Koestler needed the help of his mistress to publish *Darkness at Noon* in English. Among the writers we are concerned with at this conference, Iva Pekárková has lived in New York as a taxi driver since she left communist Czechoslovakia in 1986 and moved to the United States. She had her books such as *The World is Round* (1994) translated from the Czech original. Miroslav Penkov, on the other hand, became successful writing in English and therefore had to translate his stories about life in Bulgaria back into his mother tongue (similar to what Klaus Mann and others had done in the war generation). Research on this reversed process of translating one's own books from the foreign language back into the language one was brought up in, suggests that this double translation helps to import into the literary language words and concepts that did not exist before most likely because society did not support the attitudes and habits behind it.

An interviewer calls Penkov "something of a translator, twice over", and wants to know what this experience has been like to Penkov. Penkov explains this challenge in words that are very different from what the war generation had to cope with or refugees from countries that had been taken over by the Soviets after the Second World War: "You're really caught in a strange situation where you want to render a specific voice or a specific sound of one language into another language and you have to invent for yourself a way to carry over not only words that have no meaning in English."

For Penkov aesthetic and narratological problems prevail. He is not concerned with political or cultural differences any longer. "When it comes to dialogue," he explains, "to do that in English, I was looking at Hemingway stories; for example, where you read a story and you have someone who speaks, obviously, English but you get the sense that the person is speaking Italian or Spanish, and he manages to do that somehow." Penkov believes English to be a language that allows for more simplicity than Bulgarian where he wants to make the characters "more colorful. I need to ground them deeper into local dialect." To Penkov, Bulgarian seems to be more entangled with national history and cultural regionalism. English is more approachable in this respect, a language of freedom, as Penkov has the protagonist of his first story "Makedonia" explain when he listens to English radio and hears all the foreign language coalesce into one medium creating a cosmopolitan world: "I listen to the English and all the words sound like a single long word to me, a word devoid of history and meaning, completely free. At night, the air is thicker, and one foreign sound drags after itself another and they converge into a river, which flows freely from land to land." (Penkov 2011: 9) English seems to be set against and at the same time belongs to all the other languages.

Penkov tries to create cultural differences in the English language by augmenting the cosmopolitan character of this globalized language. A sense of Bulgarian is to be embedded into the English language. The otherness of Bulgaria is created by a local colour style. The stories are published in the wider transcultural European or cosmopolitan trans-Atlantic context. On the one hand, Penkov uses stereotypes about the Eastern and even Oriental heritage of Bulgaria. On the other hand, does that rarely happen without creating a narrative voice that avoids using the narrator's authority to confirm this alleged Otherness of Bulgaria. Either letters are quoted such as in the story Makedonia or stories from the Ottoman period told by protagonists in the stories. The setting of Penkov's stories changes from the USA to Bulgaria and back and includes an imaginary land of Bulgaria that is situated in stories and memories.

In Penkov's stories, Bulgaria is both the authentic place of his childhood, but also a place that he constructed from the perspective of the West, "the idea of the West" that he had received from his parents: "they had these fantasies that they're gonna go West, to the West. It didn't matter if it was Spain, Germany, it was one whole thing. That was your salvation: the West." Penkov calls his construction of Eastern Europe "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." It might be questioned whether Penkov's narrative, sometimes comic inversion of stereotypes actually subverts the Western idea of Eastern Europe. Similar to Kapka Kassabova's *A Street without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* (2009), he succeeds to evade a nostalgic glorification, of what in post-Wall eastern Germany was sometimes called "Ostalgie", because he is still very close to the world he experienced as a child and is aware of the Western view.

When he tells stories of the idea of the West he ridicules the Eastern naïveté. In the story "East of the West" he has the first person narrator describes his feelings when he successfully purchased a jeans from a friend: "The jeans Vera sold me that summer were about two sizes too large, and it seemed like they'd been worn before, but that didn't bother me. I even slept in them. I liked how loose they were around my waist, how much space, how much Western freedom they provided around my legs." (35) This infatuation with the idea of the West would make others notoriously dissatisfied with life in Bulgaria. For his sister "life worsened. The West gave her ideas. She would often go to the river and sit on the bank and stare, quietly, for hours on end." (35)

Penkov confronts the nostalgic view on a bygone simplicity of the East and on a sweet desire for the West with a creative and self-critical approach to the modernity that presented itself in the disguise of the idea of the West. His generation of writers acquired this idea of the West from their parents. The significance of nostalgia in Bonnett's sense evolves from this tension and gives Eastern European writers in English a voice with a particular cutting edge to literary visions that imagine the future by adapting nostalgia as an "incurable modern condition." In this way Penkov and Kassabova confirm and destroy the stereotypes about Eastern Europe at the same time they negotiate them with their Western readers. It seems they continue the liberation their parents had dreamt of by writing about the idea of the West from a nostalgic Eastern European perspective as much as they explore the idea of the East from a Western perspective. Penkov uses the English language as a medium to change perspectives without taking sides. For the majority of English speaking readers in the West, English would not have the function it gained for Penkov. While Penkov discovers the Otherness in the English language -- West of the East -- it is doubtful whether his English speaking Western readers would see the Self in the Otherness of Penkov's representations of the East -- East of the West.

In her latest book, Kassabova seems to have gone beyond this problem of the English language, a language that is both national and cosmopolitan. In *Twelve Minutes of Love. A Tango Story*, Kassabova tells the story of an around the world journey. Going from one big city in the world to another in the fashion of contemporary action thrillers, she does not hunt down a master criminal, but rather dances Tango in every possible country. Tango is a medium of communication that lives nostalgia as an "incurable modern condition." Dancing Tango

might be “an Osties' courtship — old-fashioned and frustrated. The Osties,” Kassabova explains, “as opposed to the Westies, are the former East Berliners and, by extension, all the former kids of the Eastern bloc.” (2011: 118) In allusion to Marshall McLuhan's “global village”, Kassabova speaks of “the global tango village”. The message is the medium here. Tango is Kassabova's equivalent of the English language. In contrast to the English language – in Ludmila's words a language that “actively participates in the production and proliferation of global paradigms and images” -- Tango is omnipresent in a different way because it is not a language, but activity of the body.

Even [...] as you read this, hundreds of couples are tangoing somewhere in the world, somewhere out of sight. They tango in the southern hemisphere until dawn, and they tango at dusk in the northern hemisphere. There is a point somewhere between the sun and the moon when, for a short while, everyone is dancing at the same time. (2011: 9)

The origins of Tango are in Argentina (Kassabova keeps questioning this, too). It was invented in days of modernism, in the 1920s, and expresses a variety of desires that strive for fulfillment. Tango is cosmopolitan in the sense that it does not deny national and cultural differences and it is exclusive in the sense that it is one specific form of communicating among a group of people who identify with it. It is – in one of Kassabova's aphorism “the vertical expression of a horizontal desire”. In Kassabova's understanding, tango is a human way of expressing oneself that is universal and specific at the same time. It is cosmopolitan in the sense that it establishes a sense of shared humanity in difference, community without any disregard for the essential loneliness of modern individuals.

Tango is also a deep nostalgic desire to come closer to a bygone world outside modernity. For Kassabova this search started when her parents left Bulgaria:

My years of loneliness had started with my sudden arrival in New Zealand from Bulgaria as a teenager in the early 1990s. Our family was swept up in the great exodus that flowed to the four corners of the world from post-Berlin Wall Eastern Europe. For reasons that were bewildering even to us but involved post-Communism, desperation and a university job for my scientist father, we had ended up here, at the bottom of the map. (2011: 15)

Kassabova writes *Twelve Minutes of Love* in the awareness of an exodus that has taken place after 1989, an event she experienced as the beginning of her loneliness. Loss is also the bottom of nostalgia. Kassabova did not stay in New Zealand, but moved on visiting many countries to escape nostalgia and to eventually learn how to dance tango. Tango goes back to the very beginnings of modernism and its uprooting effects on people: “unwashed men with knives and cowboy boots, dispossessed gauchos from the Pampa, deracinated working-class immigrants from Europe, desperado sailors and the descendants of slaves. They did this in a sweaty melting pot of hope and despair.” They invented “the dance of their lives, because there was no dance that spoke for them.” This “society of immigrant labourers” (23) invented the Tango, men without a home, without women and money. Kassabova's history of the origins of tango, genders the modern condition of loss as the absence of the desired other. Now she belongs to the society of immigrants or rather exiles who are searching for a wholeness that is not available any longer. This desire is a global one by the minute. *Twelve Minutes of Love* is a utopia of round-the-clock global nostalgia as the modern condition. “Life is worth living again. I have met new people and begun to make new friends. Tango and its nascent community here accepts everyone as they come. [...] Tango is already giving me a glimpse into a world of beauty that is just out of reach, but only just. Tango is becoming the first great infatuation of my life,” writes Kassabova.

Kassabova's utopian approach is not yearning for fulfillment. She is out of reach of retrieving the losses that inspire her. Her nostalgia is a point of departure, not an end to hope for an arrival. When her parents left Bulgaria she began a creative dance of loathing nostalgia. She discovered the Tango, in sociological terms, a social practice that shaped a community of people who shared the experience of loss. They habitually dance out of this nostalgic melancholia and into an imagined world of beauty.

This is in many respects the story of the Czech writer Jan Novak who took on the challenge of returning to his home country in a classical move not unlike that of postcolonial identity search. “In July of 1992, I packed up the wife and two kids and moved to Prague, then still the capital of the country of Czechoslovakia. We were leaving a white town house and a leafy street of Oak Park, Illinois, and stepping into the Big Yawning Slavic Polluted Dirty Communist Unknown.” (Novak 1995: 3) His journey is neither that of Penkov's commuting between old and new nor the global tango village of Kassabova. The return to the lost places of origin paths the shortest way to fulfill desires of nostalgia. Beauty is not Tango, but Prague. Similar to Kassabova, it was Novak's parents who decided to leave Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring. The same happens to Jan Novak's children when the family returns in 1992. For Novak this decision has some therapeutic meaning:

“When I left Czechoslovakia in 1969, it had been my father's decision: I didn't know I was leaving the old country for good, never said good-bye to the place, and still had a scar on my heart from it - moving to Prague was going to give me a chance to see if some of that scar tissue couldn't be reattached to something there.” (1995: 7)

Novak writes the book about his journey into the realms of nostalgic melancholia half a generation before Kassabova's *Tango* book and in the aftermath of the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. He looks for “something there” he may be attached to in the same physical manner Kassabova describes when she is talking about the corporeal experience of being at home where the *Tango* is. What the *Tango* is for Kassabova in her recent book, the English language signifies for Penkov and Novak. It is a medium to escape nostalgia and create something new.

Novak describes how difficult language change was for him. He dreamt “the classic émigré dreams of being trapped in the old country” (1995: 8) in English but still could not write in the language. When it happened, switching into English was an act of liberation: “the sensation was as if I'd been driving with the hand brake on and suddenly released it. The book wrote itself.” (1995: 8) In reversal of this experience with language, Novak calls it “the sweetest thing” that his children would learn Czech. The language stands for different attitudes towards the question of home. In Novak's experience, “Americans were people mad with business and money, [...] people lacking a strong sense of the places they called home or a firm social structure to measure their lives against.” (1995: 10) While English signifies “the growth of the unknown within” (1995: 11), he hopes to slow down this process by exposing the family to “the Operatic Beauty of Baroque Prague” (1995: 11) for a limited period of time.

When introducing his readers to Prague, Novak uses the English language similar to Penkov. He approaches what is foreign to his readers by telling stories that ridicule the idea of the East. He chooses familiar medieval stories such as the one about Golem and uses style and metaphor to place it into an American context: “Rabbi Loew was a great Magus, but he was a lousy sculptor - his homunculus came out looking like a fat basketball center recovering from third-degree burns. The rabbi didn't care because nobody had to look at his man of clay.” (1995: 20)

I do not have the time to give more examples of loathing nostalgia in this talk. Comparing Novak, Penkov and Kassabova, Penkov's stories about Bulgaria succeed in turning against their inherent nostalgia better than Novak's non-fiction. Novak has an autobiographical approach and writes shortly after the end of the Cold War. His text is almost a historical and cultural guide book to Prague. This might be the reason why it is more difficult for him to escape the old national grievances and fears in a way that nostalgic melancholia does not surge up from the narrative. When Penkov, for instance, tells the story of the Bulgarian territorial losses to Serbia (2011: 27) or the five hundred years of Ottoman occupation and forty years of Communist rule (2011: 139), the reader senses the same paralyzing nostalgic melancholia about the loss of national greatness one finds in Novak. For example, he speaks about the by-gone glory of now VW-owned Skoda - “paradox of history” (30) since it was Hitler who founded Volkswagen long after Emil von Skoda's pioneering achievement (1995: 30). For obvious reasons, Kassabova is not likely to be troubled by these stories in her *Tango* book. She is not concerned with the “paradox of history” (30), Novak deplures, because she avoids any national issues in her *Tango* book.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that loss of home and loathing nostalgia in the English writings of Central and Eastern European Exiles Writers after 1989 is very much linked to genre and the content of the stories told. The English language globalizes the stories situated in the national heritage of the countries that were left, but it cannot protect them from nostalgia either on the side of English speaking readers who see their idea of Eastern Europe confirmed or on the side of the exiles who try reattach the individual and collective “scar tissue [...] to something there” in the former home countries (Novak 1995: 7). Loathing nostalgia is omnipresent in the three texts I have just discussed. It is Kassabova's *Tango* book, however, that does not trust English to achieve this and therefore manages to make nostalgia a modern condition exploring globalized spaces where “a world of beauty” can be experienced in *Tango*.

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