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London – Labyrinth, Initiation or Trap for Eastern Europeans: Reflections in Bulgarian
and Latvian prose (A. Popov and V. Lācītis)

London, Latvia, Bulgaria – a city and two states that are quite far apart from each other in geographical terms, but in the face of global changes in the 21st century and the search for one's own identity of a Eastern European, these places become constituent parts of a new geo-political and consequently literary paradigm when the former imperial metropolis that already has a diverse multicultural experience becomes a mother or step-mother for ethnical groups that historically might not have been part of the British Empire, especially those of Eastern Europe.

This paper will deal with the migration experience through the subjective lens of a literary description, endeavoring to gain an objective outlook by comparing separate individual artistic views. Within this approach two texts will be compared, texts that are produced independently of each other but whose basis is an experience with a lot of common features although the historical and cultural premises both synchronically and diachronically differ.

The integration of Westernity into the everyday lives of Eastern Europeans has a significant side-effect – the movement of people in the search of a better job and life conditions. Great Britain with its need for labor and accordingly soft immigration policies in the early 21st century was very expedient for Eastern Europeans and thus becoming one of the main destinations for seekers of a better life. London as one of the European meccas of multiculturalism rapidly obtained Eastern European features and today can be considered an important Eastern European city as well. London is a peculiar concentrate of possibilities and challenges and a special kind of litmus test for the self-confidence of an Eastern European. It is possible to generalize opinion of social antropologist Michał Garapich, what he has said about Poles in London: “British pragmatism and the free market make it possible for migrants to perceive the

British Isles as the fulfilment of their dreams of a genuine meritocracy. [...] London appears so attractive [...] because the number of potential encounters, human relationships, life-course scenarios, life-changing events, etc. is nearly infinite. [...] with many Polish migrants we find a curious mixture of fatalism and individualism, of the conviction that luck is the determining factor and the belief that in London, it is sufficient to want to work in order to gain esteem and money.” (Garapich 69, 72).

Although the communities at the new location are shaped based on ethnical and linguistical properties, a common mentality from socialistic past creates a wider cultural group of Eastern Europeans.

This multi-dimensional structure of belonging that is in some aspects common to all Eastern Europeans is mentioned by Latvian writer Vilis Lācītis at the beginning of his novel in an episode where the protagonist sails away from his homeland misfortunes. On the ship he meets a fellow countryman, an experienced emigrant, who sketches in broad strokes the main features of the life of an immigrant from Eastern Europe. This experienced emigrant Pēteris says: “You must find a settlement where mostly Eastern Europeans live, that’s all.

What do you mean by that – that’s all? – I asked.

He didn’t quite comprehend. Well, what do I mean? You don’t need anything else. They’ll know what to do. You’ll get a job and You won’t have to bother with the language. Man, Russian is enough for me all over the world. Because all our folk, You know, the former folk, You know what I mean, speak Russian.” (Lācītis, 13)

But this episode with “our folk” gets destroyed right away. “Our folk” – it has become a part of the free market.

Pēteris continues: “Just don’t mess with the Poles. They’re jerks, they take away our jobs. But from Lithuans you can buy all the papers, god damn’, everything you might ever need. If you meet a Lithuan in abroad, he’ll do anything. If only he doesn’t screw you, of course.”(Lācītis, 14).

Then Pēteris quite broadly expands on the characteristics of Westerners: “You thought that they all are normal people while you were living in Soviet Union. You know why? Because their image was made from Soviet movies where the foreigners were played by our actors. But no, they don’t have anything on the inside. They’re

empty humans. Just rich bastards. You don't even have anything to talk about with them." (Lācītis, 14). To the protagonist's (who is also the narrator) question, how can he know that if he doesn't understand the language, Pēteris replies: "I see it. You can see it at the first glance. Just pigs." (Lācītis, 14). Extremely interesting is the ending of this fragment, when Pēteris says: "Just be careful with Lettons. They won't screw anyone like their own folk" (Lācītis, 14). Although all the predictions and stereotypes find their fulfilment, they are destroyed and rebutted as well. During the first days in London, the narrator observes the smile of the Londoners "that you won't squeeze out in Latvia even with a plastic surgery" and the first weeks abroad are livable due to the solidarity of other Latvians although later the betrayal from them is bitter. A swinging between solidarity and selfishness is characteristic to the life of an immigrant in both of the novels.

The integration of Eastern Europeans in London's both specifically British and universally multicultural milieu has found considerable echoes in the literature of Eastern Europe, thus making it possible to a certain extent to talk about new kind of the texts of e-/im-migration.

On the one hand the space of London and the events taking place there is a great source to create stories to be told, simultaneously being evidence of specific age bearing the importance of a wider generalization. For this reason London is an indicator, an environment with its own diversity, which is a suitable surrounding to fit in a labyrinth and when the exit is successfully found it becomes an initiation, when not – then it becomes a trap. Somehow London is analog of the whole world. Argentinian writer Jorhe Luis Borges has noted: "There's no need to build a labyrinth when the entire universe is one. For the man who truly wants to hide himself, London is a much better labyrinth than a rooftop room to which every blessed hallway in a building leads." (Borges, 261).

With its equivocal character, constantly changing atmosphere and diversity, London vividly marks the relationship between a human being and the world. Nonetheless it is not the London about which Samuel Johnson said – "Why, Sir, you find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.

London offers everything that life can afford, but the meaning and content of these two notions has become somewhat vague and obscure.” (Boswell, 53).

The experience in foreign environment by majority of ethnical migrant communities are portrayed in respective national literatures in texts covering various literary genres, for example, in Lithuanian literature reaching figures of more than ten and in Polish literature even more (see: Plesske@Rostek; Laurušaite). Regarding this aspect Latvian literature is not a dynamic one, although the number of Latvian emigrants are quite astounding. In Latvian literature only a handful of literary works are devoted to the experiences of the new wave of emigration. The author Vilis Lācītis whose work was chosen for this examination is not the first one describing this phenomenon, but it is the most significant one that uncovers the importance of this particular subject though not gaining any further development. The work by the Bulgarian author Alek Popov is the result of a search for a work that would give a wider perspective and that could be available to the experience of a Latvian reader, namely, would be translated into Latvian and would expand the insight into the life of an emigrant. The comparison between Latvian and Bulgarian texts grants an opportunity to analyse the Eastern European emigrant experience in the North-South dimension. So – the focus of this paper is a comparison of two novels from Eastern Europe – *Mission London* (*Мисия Лондон*, 2001) by Bulgarian writer Alek Popov (Алек Попов, 1966) and *Under construction with a view on London* (*Stroika ar skatu uz Londonu*, 2010) by Vilis Lācītis (real name: Aleksandrs Ruģēns, 1975).

The narratives of both novels differ by focusing on different social environments. Popov describes the embassy and the life of its employees, Lācītis takes a look on the life of an immigrant from the perspective of a migrant worker. This difference is defined mostly by the personal experience of the authors. Both novels vividly portray the national temper. Disregarding the differences both these novels can be put under one practical and aesthetical paradigm of experience as lived by an Eastern European. The portrayal of the dramatic integration process involves a lot of comical discourse in both novels, thus linking both novels to the traditions of British humor. At the same time both protagonists experience trials that makes London to be conceived as a place for initiation, a labyrinth that allows to gain new

and valuable experience, but for some of the figures also a trap where all the hopes shatter.

Both authors point quite vividly to the gap dividing the West from the East and thus both novels have a thoroughly dramatic setting. In both novels the protagonists confront essential trials regarding the social survival, at the same time presenting these conditions in a manner that could be described as entertaining with a spark of joyfulness and ridicule.

As Izvor Moralic notes in his review of Popov's novel, "entertainment and bureaucracy aren't usually found together, at least not in life. Even in a novel, this can be considered a pretty hazardous operation. And things get even more problematic if you add the current *idée du jour* of culture clash. Clash is always something of a dramatic character, but in this particular case the clash is of a soft nature. It must be mentioned that since the time when these novels were first published some important geopolitical changes have taken place, namely, the refugee crisis, that has added a different character to the questions of migration. But the essence remains the same nonetheless – the spoilt Western society can not exist without immigrants and this migration in addition is quite multi-layered. The Western society is paying its dues for its anterior imperialism and Eurocentric arrogance.

Turning to the novels under question – one can say that Lācītis binds the portrayal of a prolet survival with entertainment and comical scenes from daily life. The perspective of the narrator in his novel is from the first person, thus the different relationship between the protagonist and the surrounding environment is indicated already by this choice, as Popov narrates his tale in the third person.

Vilis Lācītis is a pseudonym and it is very important from the aspects of text reception and its presentation, it is a peculiar marketing strategy and interplay of cultural signs. This pseudonym contains several layers of meaning that have a strong effect on the Latvian reader, thus putting into the light of multiculturalism a spark of national characteristic. Literaly *Lācītis* is a diminutive of the word *lācis* (bear in Latvian). It is a common method to form surnames in Latvian with the help of diminutives (one third of Latvian surnames are diminutives), but at the same time this particular surname is quite unusual and would rather be attributed to a children's toy –

a teddy bear. Thus already the pseudonym marks a certain air of lightness and playfulness and the author tries to retain this atmosphere in his narrative where the protagonist not always encounters the easiest of situations. This pseudonym contains another dimension that in a way makes this playfulness a problematic phenomenon with the load of cultural references and reminiscences – in Latvian literature there was a writer Vilis Lācis who was a popular author of pulp fiction in the pre-Second World war era and he wrote novels about self-made men, thus affirming the value of progress and self-development, and inspiring large masses of readers. But in 1940 during the Soviet occupation he became a symbol of national betrayal – he became the leader of the puppet government right to his death and putting his signature on the documents for the deportation of people to Siberia. Vilis Lācis constructs his protagonist in a similar fashion to the heroes of Vilis Lācis, but a more non-chalant one, without a clearly defined purpose, more as a Fortune's darling, making his protagonist to take a decision about his further life only at the very end of the narrative. At the same time this diminutive points to an ironic distance from the relationship between a writer and politics.

Both authors are playing with cultural signs that lose their significance in a translation. In the translation of Popov's work into Latvian there are a lot of footnotes that brings the reader's attention to various linguistically comical situations and the deconstruction of cultural signs. One can encounter elements of the comical in the title of the novel as well.

V. Lācis is more radical in his intentions – both in his choice of pseudonym and the title. The presence of Russian slang in the title (*strojka* – an unfinished building still in the process of building) indicates the social milieu and is a parody of the heritage from Vilis Lācis who introduced into Latvian literature the self-made man character types similar to those of Jack London, who were later on reshaped into the builders of communism when the author became a Soviet collaborationist. Despite the comical re-coding it brings a bitter intonation as well. Thus a dramatic age that has shaped the permanent aura of sorrow and suffering in the Latvian mental setup is brought on the scenery of the novel although not directly and without further elaboration in the narrative, but the author manages to deconstruct it light-heartedly.

Thus the image of London gains an inverse meaning – it is a chance to break away not only from the economic deficiencies, but from the ideological traps reigning in one's homeland as well. Despite the irony about V. Lācis, the construction of the narrator-protagonist mostly relies on the conception of a man found in the works of V. Lācis, where the main hero has experienced a decline on the social ladder due to a wicked joke of Fortune and who is willing to overcome this situation by regaining his position in the socium. It is a storyline that is throughout a bourgeois success-story, although the author endeavors to position himself as an apostle of freedom, an enlightened individual, unbound from the system, but at the end he is just a reflection of the system – the goal is to study at Cambridge and this goal is attained.

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