Blood Is Thicker than the Ocean: Language and Immigration in Miroslav Penkov's *East of the West*

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Abstract
Miroslav Penkov's East of the West is a collection of stories which take place in Bulgaria and the United States and deal with the experiences of immigration and deterritorialization. In this paper I study the ways in which Penkov uses language to communicate the immigrant's experience of miscommunication. While deterritorialization by immigration is a universal subject, in Penkov's book of stories he deals explicitly with the relationship between east and west and demonstrates, beginning with the title of his book, that these concepts are inherently relative.

Keywords: *deterritorialization, immigration, East of the West, Miroslav Penkov, minor literature, language, literature.*

1. Language and Communication Gaps

Miroslav Penkov's book of stories, East of the West, is a book about language and immigration. All eight stories feature characters that have experienced dislocation in time, space, or language: an old man finds his wife's long-forgotten love-letters from her dead partisan lover; a boy's identity is ruptured by a river cutting his village in two; a young man immigrates from Bulgaria to America; a girl grows up with a brain-damaged twin sister and English invaders; a Bulgarian immigrant visits his homeland with his Japanese-American wife; two boys experience the falling of the Bulgarian government and mass uprisings; a Turkish girl lives in Bulgaria and receives a new name; and a Bulgarian emigrant to the United States struggles with cultural barriers and divorce. All of these characters have been deterritorialized, either by actively changing their surroundings or by having the very ground they stand on change beneath their feet. This deterritorialization is caused by, and creates further gaps of communication,

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that are introduced into the plot by language differences, cultural barriers, and personal estrangements.

In order to bridge these communication gaps, the various narrators tell their distinct stories, trying to make the readers "borrow [their] eyes for an instant" (Penkov, 2011: 70). This works both on the level of the story and on the level of its production, as the author tries to introduce Bulgaria to an English readership, while retrieving his lost homeland through writing. "Moving to America," he says in an interview for The Guardian from 2012, "Suddenly I felt so removed from everyone I cared about, and writing was the only way I knew to cross the ocean, to shorten the distance".

While connecting America and Bulgaria, the stories simultaneously deepen the rupture between them. The book, written in English, Penkov's second language, and taking place mostly in Bulgaria, indicates the author's dual (immigrant) identity while creating a communication gap between author and reader, as the latter is unfamiliar with many Bulgarian words and concepts which must be translated and explained. The need to explain is, of course, a consequence of language barriers, but it is also an inherent part of writing. When information needs to be expressed in words, it is a sign that a communication gap exists. In "Devshirmeh," after immigrating to America, the narrator tells his daughter a story of Bulgaria, which, because it was "not in [her] mother's milk and not in [her] air" (194), must be articulated. The narrator thus insinuates that stories that need telling are not a part of one's 'natural identity.'

Thus, language in East of the West is an instrument of connection and detachment. Words can connect distant contemporaries and ancestors, as in "Makedonija" the narrator reconnects to his own past through the old partisan's love-letters, in "Buying Lenin" Sinko learns English and "the words [rise] up liberated" (60), and in "Devshirmeh" a father and his daughter connect to Bulgaria through an old tale. But words can also reawake unwanted memories and distort and complicate identity; words can act "like a rash" (62), they can induce vomiting, and they can "pile on [one's] heart like stones" (43), their weight pulling one down to the earth. "The English language, Granpa insisted, was a rabid dog" (56), and throughout the book there is a struggle between it and Bulgarian.

The importance of language for identity is obvious, and Penkov's narrators are immediately problematized; before we even hear their stories, their duality is apparent in the author's use of English to write 'Bulgarian stories.' To use Deleuze and Guattari's definitions from their formative text,

"What is a Minor Literature?" (1986) East of the West is written in a major, even international language, while deterritorializing this language to the needs of a minority. Minor literature's most prominent feature is deterritorialization; dislocating language and using it differently, for as the narrators of "The Letter" and "Buying Lenin" explain, words mean different things in different places (Penkov: 60, 78).

By Penkov's own testimony, he writes in a language which restricts him: "There is a certain economy and simplicity in my English prose that I had to invent, because this is the English that I know."2 The author uses the sobriety and "thinness" of his English to detach it from metaphor and overelaboration. Phrases such as, "even the shit, with proper history, becomes important" (133) put things in a simple, straightforward way, obscuring attempt to turn them into allegories.3 English, or any secondary language is, as "Makedonija's" narrator says, "devoid of history and meaning, completely free" (6); words that are not "artificially enriched," as Delueze and Guattari define them (1986: 19), can be used to forge a new identity.

Hence, detachment can lead to both pain and freedom. This is emphasized in the book by the symbolism of the river (and water in general) which features in many of the stories in which the river is a symbol of change and uprootedness, as well as freedom. In the title story "East of the West" a man loses all his loved ones and, when "the last connection to the past is gone," he is reborn. "I thought how much I wanted to be like the river, which has no memory, and how little like the earth, which could never forget" (44). Other characters, such as Maria in "The Letter" and Sinko in "Buying Lenin" understand that "blood is thicker than the ocean" (63), the past stronger than distance, and they cannot escape past and memories by running. "I want to live again as someone who holds no memory of me" (3), says the old narrator in "Makedonija," articulating the wish to begin anew, to be reborn.

2. National Identity

The relation between memory, identity, and national boundaries, is studied by Jonathan Boyarin in his essay, "Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory" (1994). He shows how the social dimensions of time and space are construed by, and simultaneously create, memory. Memory and identity, he

[2] From an interview for npr.
[3] See Deleuze and Guattari on allegories in Kafka's minor language in page 19 of "Towards a Minor Literature".

claims, are "basically the same concept" (23). And indeed, the characters in East of the West try to run from their memories and change their identities by altering space, as their identities are created in relation to time and space.

Boyarin suggests there is a strong connection between the view of time as sequential and distinct from simultaneous space and the concept of the nation as a sharply defined "body." Thus, irregular time and break of causality in Penkov's stories deterritorialize language and present 'immigrational' consciousness as fragmentized and not clearly bordered by space and time. Boyarin wishes to challenge "the nation form grounded as it is in notions of fixed and unchallenging geography" (2). Borders such as the river in "East of the West" are not sharply defined lines, and cannot turn one half of a Bulgarian village to Serbian overnight. But neither can it be ignored, and the identities shaped by it are changed and complicated, neither here nor there.

Being in this "in-between" space, the displaced cannot ignore questions of identity, national and personal, because they can no longer consider such a thing as a 'natural identity.' A common feature of immigration is the inevitable questioning of identity. Once natural surroundings have been removed one must define oneself, call oneself 'American', 'Bulgarian', 'Turk', or 'Serb', and constantly wonder if changing the definition will change the thing itself, if, as Kemal wonders in "Night Horizon," calling a thorn a fig will enable one to feast upon it.

Because questions of identity cannot be ignored or taken for granted in 'minor literature' every occurrence, claim Deleuze and Guattari, however personal, is also political and collective (1986: 17). This is not to say that there is a direct metaphoric relationship between the two, or that minor literature places the political above the personal, but that the two are intertwined and inseparable. In "Devshirmeh" for instance, a divorced Bulgarian immigrant couple vie for the love of their daughter. But while this is a strictly personal issue, national concepts interfere when the father insists his daughter Elli speak only Bulgarian and the mother talks to her strictly in English. Mihail, the father, regrets coming to America and furiously tries to maintain his Bulgarian identity, while his ex-wife Maya has moved on, and wants the same for her daughter. Both see in Elli a continuation of themselves and fight for her identity as it is also their own. Thus, the collective and national issues cannot be severed from the personal.

Furthermore, almost all of the characters are introduced in relation to political occurrences and spaces, whether they were born "just twenty years

after we got rid of the Turks" (3), "the winter after the Soviets fell" (79), or "on the Bulgarian side of the river" (27). The intermingling of the political and the personal is also emphasized in the various love stories in the book. When characters are infatuated it is always with a political\cultural identity as well as with an individual person. Thus, 'Nose's' infatuation with his cousin Vera in "East of the West" is inseparable from his fascination with the West epitomized in her jeans and Adidas shoes, which are the first things he notices about her, and for the 'Granpa' of "Buying Lenin" the "love of his life" is simultaneously the communist party and his wife. 'Grandmoms', of "The Letter" falls in love with 'Mister' because he reminds her of Western movies and the things she can never have, and in "Makedonija" and "Devshirmeh" a woman is loved by two men who represent different cultural or political stances.

The political, collective, and national aspects are interweaved in East of the West also by use of narrative levels, which break the sequence of the diegesis, while creating links between the narrated stories. Such a link is manifest in "Buying Lenin" when the narrator reads from Lenin's "Letters to Relatives" and discovers that "Lenin and I are so much alike" (20), both having studied abroad in lonesome exile. In "Makedonija" and "Devshirmeh" the hypo-diegetic level is a tale of the past, which intrudes into the present, changing it. The tale Mihail tells his daughter in "Devshirmeh" is an ancient Bulgarian story, half oral myth and half his own invention. The mythic time of the story, in which "cause and effect break down" (195, 215) time and again intrudes into the realistic time of the diegesis. This is especially prominent when the reader is no longer notified of the act of narration: a story that we know is told at bedtime to a drowsy daughter begins to intrude at random points.

3. The Other and the Body

The political-national aspect of the personal is enacted once one leaves "natural" space. In a foreign surrounding, the original national-cultural identity lies in relation to the "other" which emphasizes it. Hence the book's name East of the West; a place is "East" only when put in relation to "West". This is why Serbia can play the role of the West in relation to Bulgaria in "East of the West," the war with the Turks makes Macedonians and Bulgarians 'brothers' in "Makedonija," and the Gypsies in "Picture with Yuki" can serve as "others" to the Bulgarian-American protagonist.

The "other" acts as a distorted mirror which is made stranger the closer one is to it. Maria of "The Letter" looks at a polished table top, sees her own face "distorted" (88) and recognizes it as the face of her brain-damaged twin sister, Magda. Later in the story, when Maria tries to assimilate the foreign, "English" culture, her actions are closely paralleled to Magda's. Hence distortion caused by assimilating a foreign culture is mirrored in one caused by physical impairment.

Distorted bodies form distorted words. When the narrator's half-paralyzed wife in "Makedonija" speaks, her words "roll out disjoined, like baby talk" (4). The narrator of this same story, while listening to the radio, says "I listen to the English and all the words sound like a single long word to me" (6). Both the wife's "disjoined" words, and the foreign English, joined to one long word, are unintelligible. In "The Letter" English is the language of the rich and dissociated citizens, 'Mister' and 'Missis,' and is described by the "warbled," deterritorialized sound, "dura bura dura bura" (77, 87). Closely related are brain damaged Magda's words, "all mumbly and downright stupid sometimes" (82). This comparison is complete when we learn that the English 'Mister,' trying to speak Bulgarian, "sounds just like Magda. The right words but every word a touch off, crippled" (83).

As Boyarin writes, the body "tells itself (genetic) stories" (1994: 21), and every individual body is a part of a political, national one. The deformed and paralyzed bodies in East of the West are also national bodies, signaling distorted space and identity. The national body is construed of intersubjective identities, which are meant to form a whole. But, as Boyarin shows, this is never truly a whole "organic" body, sharply bordered and defined. In "Night Horizon" Kemal describes a line of people climbing the mountain as "a snake just hacked to pieces" (162), that is, a body that was once, or was supposed to be, whole.

The tormented body of the nation is compared to a problematized mother-figure. In "The Letter" Maria is afraid Madga's baby will inherit her non-genetic brain injury through "her blood and milk" (88), and the mother's milk in "Night Horizon" is rotten, as Kemal's biological mother is wasting away from cancer and her motherland betrays her. In "Makedonija" the mountain becomes a substitute for the mother as the partisan Spesov, and the narrator's brother leave their families for their ideals, for their metaphorical "brothers." Spesov describes the "stone and mud" of the mountain as substitutes for a woman's breasts, and the brother refuses to drink milk in a symbolical trial that refutes his familial connections. The specific mountain

(Vitosha in "Makedonija," Rhodope in "Night Horizon") is a fixture of national identity, but also a way to overcome it, reclaim roots and memory, and say like in the partisan song Spesov quotes in his letters:

I got no father
I got no mother
Father to scorn me
Mother to mourn me,
My father - the mountain
My mother - the shotgun (9, 22, 23).

In the same way, the river in "East of the West" is both a symbol of freedom, as mentioned above, and a fixture of the past. It is the river that 'Nose,' the narrator, must flee, the scene of the deaths of his sister, mother, and father, the border between him and his love Vera, and it is also the river that he mimics, becoming changeable and rootless.

The natural elements in the stories, like words, and the book itself, are instruments of both estrangement and connection. "Blood binds those in [the story] and blood divides them," says Mihail in "Devishermeh" (124). The past for Penkov is something organic and alive which is communicated through the fluids of life, blood and milk, and words, in a sense, kill it. "One of the ways that life is maintained is through a constant effort to retain the image of the past - to rescue the dead and oppressed ancestors by giving their lives new meaning," says Boyarin (27). This is what Sinko's old grandfather tries to do in "Buying Lenin." When he discovers his fellow partisans lying dead in a dugout, mummified after seven years of being too scared to come out, he decides that they could not have died for nothing, and "so I lived my life as though ideals really mattered. And in the end they did" (73-74).

4. Conclusions

By appropriating the English language Penkov recreates the immigrant experience, and bridges a gap between distant spaces, and between past and present. The bridge of words he builds across the ocean serves to describe the gap between cultures, and through describing it both transcends and enlarges it. His use of different narrative levels to create intermingled stories of past and present, proximity and distance, and further communication barriers help to create a world in which casualty breaks down; a world of memory. The immigrant experience of bridging gaps and

widening them, of disconnecting and finding new connections, of rebirth, is also the experience of writing. Literature in general is an attempt at communication, bridging a gap which must always exist so that communication will continue. An old man in "Night Horizon" reads poetry to his daughter over the radio. If once she had answered her father's calls, communication between father and daughter would resume, and he would cease trying to touch her through the public medium of the radio; without their communication gap there would be nothing to communicate to the radio listeners/book readers. If there was no gap to cross there would be no need for a bridge.

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