



## IN MEMORIAM: \_\_\_\_\_

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An internationally recognized scholar, Professor Houswitschka was both versatile and prolific. His publications cover a wide range of subjects – from medieval literature through politics and literature in the “long” eighteenth century to migration literature, film, and contemporary drama in English. He was also very active on the conference scene and in setting up international exchange schemes for the benefit of students and scholars across Europe.

The article below testifies to Professor Houswitschka’s interest in the work of migrant writers from central and eastern Europe who have chosen English as their literary medium. An earlier version of the text was presented at the international conference “Re-Inventing Eastern Europe,” held in Vienna on 17–19 May 2012.



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

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Writers who are forced into exile by a hostile government tend to suffer from the grievances of loss and deprivation. They either divorce themselves completely from their former home country or they look back in nostalgia. After 1989, leaving central and eastern European homes was not only a free decision, but could also be 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. This article 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 and Miroslav Penkov and Czech writer 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. She opens her study on *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) with a contemporary Russian claiming “that the past has become much more unpredictable than the future” (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” (xiv). 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” (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. Memory politics has become an enduring companion of any vision 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 uses Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s concept of Germany’s post-war denial and applies it to Great Britain’s post-colonial melancholia. Nostalgia prevents entire nations from constructing “the stranger” as 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 157)

Alastair Bonnett tries to lead the way out of this paralyzing dilemma when he calls for a creative concept of nostalgia that does not turn against modernity and utopian socialism. 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” (10). According to Bonnett, “nostalgia disturbs modern life,” because 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, which developed from a turn against paralyzing post-colonial melancholia, have to do with Eastern European exiles who use the English language to confront the history of post-Wall Europe?

The loss of home is, for them, a deliberate one and returning home is neither impossible nor a seminal chapter in an émigré’s biography. Rather it is 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. (Shlachter)

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 Bonnett says (10). Nostalgia is not paralyzing the writers who are identified as *eastern European* by their English-speaking readers.

At this point, it might be appropriate to give a provisional definition of the term “eastern European.” Penkov makes it very clear that he never thought of himself as an eastern European, but as 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 conceptualizing Europe’s eastern half which are embedded in western thought and make it difficult to

work without this concept. For most present-day denizens of Europe's western parts eastern Europe has become a term that is associated with the fall of the Soviet Empire. This is an acknowledgement of 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. Before 1989, many westerners could not care less whether the countries behind the Iron Curtain were "eastern" or not, because they formed a menacing bloc of ideological opponents. But the post – 1989 perspective would quickly develop a sense of uneasiness with a term that did, to a certain degree, do an injustice to practically everyone who was called *eastern* European while still offering a nostalgic view on the past in spite of this.

For Polish-born Eva Hoffman, who emigrated in early adolescence, eastern Europe is the place of her memories, but it is also a place that after the seventeenth century "has been the arena for imperial struggles and expansion from both East and West" (xi). This includes periods of German and Austrian hegemony that seem to let Hoffman favour the concept of eastern Europe not only for personal reasons:

"Eastern Europe" has been for me a notion potent with personal associations. ... Eastern Europe—remained for me an idealized landscape of the mind. Because I had loved and lost it, because I had been cut off from it summarily and, it seemed, irrevocably, it stayed arrested in my imagination as a land of childhood sensuality, lyricism, vividness, and human warmth. (ix)

Hoffmann was forced out of the country before the changes of 1989. This makes a difference. In this sense, eastern Europe acquires an aspect of nostalgia and, in Bonnett's words, is "presented as a field of acknowledgement, an integral aspect of the modern condition, something that is present whether or not we identify and engage with it or repress and deny it" (169). The idea that "nostalgia works within and against the present" (169) 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 in the Acknowledgements section of his collection of short stories *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).

Since Eva Hoffman, it has become commonplace to elaborate on the crucial role that 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 them. Hoffmann's period of exile was a lasting one and in the times of the Cold War she could not go back regularly. English became a new home that could no longer accommodate that other parallel world in the Polish language. 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 the country.

It takes adults a much longer time to acquire a foreign language and to start writing in it. W.G. Sebald never wrote in English. Klaus Mann, on the other hand, published his autobiography *Turning Point* in English, in 1944 when he served in the US Army and then translated it back into German after the war. Arthur Koestler needed help to write his best-known novel *Darkness at Noon* in English but published his subsequent work in this new language. 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 *The World is Round* (1994), and other books, translated from the Czech original. Miroslav Penkov, on the other hand, became a successful English writer almost from the very start and, therefore, had to translate his stories about life in Bulgaria back into his mother tongue. He shares this experience with wartime German exiles.

To imagine the other is easier when one looks at oneself in a different language. That is the experience Klaus and Erika Mann would have had in exile.<sup>1</sup> Writing in English became an activity that had

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of Klaus and Erika Mann's political writings in exile, see Houswitschka 2012.

changed Klaus Mann's way of thinking, as he described when translating himself from English back into German after the war:

*Es war im Verlauf dieser peniblen Arbeit, daß mir erst so recht klar wurde, wie sehr meine englische Ausdrucksweise, meine englische Denkungsart sich schon jetzt von meiner ursprünglichen, deutschen unterscheidet. Es ist wohl etwas wie eine psychologische Spaltung, ein schizophrener Prozeß, den man durchmacht, wenn man zweisprachig zu werden versucht – interessant, aber beunruhigend. (291)<sup>2</sup>*

Research on this reversed process of translating one's own books from the *foreign* back into the *native* language, suggests that this double translation might sometimes even help to import, into the receiving language, words and concepts that did not exist before because society did not support the attitudes and habits behind them.

From a national point of view, this process might appear as a psychological schism or a schizophrenic process. Verena Jung's research on these self-translations suggests a different understanding that could be described as *transcultural*. Jung speaks of the "bicultural status of the self-translators as cultural mediators ... that leads to the significant changes and restructurings that the self-translators make in their German version" (529). For Klaus Mann, a translator had to take more into consideration than "differences in knowledge base between the readerships of the English original version and the German version" (529), as Jung suggests in her study. Mann had experienced the two languages in quite different contexts. English was the language he had used in exile; a very different kind of life that was defined not only by losses, but also by new opportunities and a vision of shared values of humanness and democratic principles.

Mann believed that a person of transcultural identity who chose exile deliberately as a form of modern life would have been characterized by the act of translation. Mann himself is reminiscent of what he wrote about one of André Gide's fictional characters, nineteen-year-old Lafcadio, "without a country and without a conscience, the spirited good-for-nothing and rakish adventurer. He possesses nothing, except a fine vocabulary in six languages which he picked up in the boudoir of his mother; nothing, except his wit, his youth, his pride, his instinct, his vitality" (149).

Mann describes a transcultural space that is created by the exile translating from one language to the other. For Mann returning home was only possible after the war. Similarly, Jewish exiles, particularly children, who were forced to leave their home countries and associated self-hatred and life-threatening situations with their former German mother tongue, tried to rid themselves of this language altogether. They had experienced discrimination and persecution in Germany. Karen Gershon was a Jewish child who had escaped Nazi Germany on the *Kindertransport* and later became a poet. From the distance of some twenty years, in an article entitled "A Stranger in a Strange Land," she explains this repulsion for and rejection of the German language that had made her a "lesser child":

Because of the war I remained in England; I went to live amongst English people, and I began to write in English: in a revulsion against everything German, out of a desire to belong, and because really I had no choice. I did not at first understand all it meant for me as a poet; to discard my mother-tongue and adopt a foreign language in its stead. I am convinced that the change of language has completely changed my poetry. I would have written German for the love of it but I write English because there are things I wish to say. (10)

In Sigrid Luchtenberg's typology Gershon is a long-term emigrant/immigrant whose departure is permanent and who is forced to integrate into her new homeland (16).

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<sup>2</sup> "It was during the course of this painstaking task that I finally began to realise how much my English way of expressing myself and my English way of thinking already differed from my original, German one. It seems to be something like a psychological schism, a schizophrenic process that one undergoes in the attempt to become bilingual – interesting, but also deeply worrying" (translation from Jung 529).

Penkov, on the other hand, belongs to the group of “ideal-typical transmigrants,” who “do not tend to distinguish in this way between region of origin and of arrival, but develop instead an ambiguous strategy of simultaneously striving for inclusion while maintaining differences” (Luchtenberg 17). Penkov returns to Bulgaria for holidays whenever he wants. The translation from one language to the other, however, is the same. An interviewer calls Penkov “something of a translator, twice over,” and wants to know what this experience has been like for him. Penkov explains this challenge in words that are very different from the language of the war generation or refugees from Soviet-dominated countries. For them exile was the only way to survive and particularly Jewish exiles from Germany became alienated from their mother tongue. Penkov has a more playful relationship to language because he had a free choice: “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” (Shlachter).

For Penkov aesthetic and narratological problems prevail. He is no longer concerned with political or cultural differences. “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” (Schlachter). Penkov believes English to be a language that allows for a greater simplicity than Bulgarian does, it is Bulgarian he uses to make the characters “more colorful. I need to ground them deeper into local dialect” (Schlachter). To Penkov, Bulgarian seems to be more entangled with national history, cultural regionalism, and, of course, emotions that are deeply embedded in his childhood. Bulgarian is the language he was brought up with: English is acquired outside of any context; it is a language of freedom. Penkov has the protagonist of his first story “Makedonia” in the collection explain that when he listens to an English radio station, he 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. (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 English 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 colourful, local 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 Penkov quotes letters such as in the story “Makedonia” or he has stories from the Ottoman period told by their protagonists. The setting of Penkov’s stories shifts from the USA to Bulgaria and back and includes an imaginary land of Bulgaria that is situated in stories and memories. Modern communication and transportation technologies help him to “move physically and mentally – between countries and cultures” (Luchtenberg 17).

In Penkov’s stories, Bulgaria is both the authentic place of his childhood, but also a place that he has constructed from the perspective of the west, “the idea of the West” that he received from his parents, as he explained to Zack Shlachter in the interview: “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.” In the same interview, 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. (Schlachter)

It might be questioned whether Penkov's narrative, sometimes a comic inversion of stereotypes, actually subverts the western idea of eastern Europe. As Kapka Kassabova does in *A Street without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* (2009), Penkov succeeds in evading a nostalgic glorification, of what in post-Wall eastern Germany was sometimes called "Ostalgia." This is because he is still very close to the world he experienced as a child and is aware of the western view of it. East Germans

were discovering a GDR identity in retrospect (*nachgeholtte Identität*). Regrets for the lost security of life under the SED state have been dubbed "Ostalgia" (*Ostalgie*), a play on words depicting a specifically "eastern" nostalgia. Ostalgia acts as a focus both for the reinvention of the past in an attempt to salvage some collective dignity from unification on western terms ... Ostalgia is characterized by a somewhat masochistic nostalgia for the "bad old days." (Hogwood 74)

When Penkov writes about the idea of the west, he ridicules eastern naïveté. In the story "East of the West," the first-person narrator describes the feelings he had, under communism, after he had successfully purchased a pair of 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 of the bygone simplicity of the east and, with a creative and self-critical approach, challenges the sweet desire for the modernity the west came to represent. 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 that imagines the east in the west and the future by adapting nostalgia as an "incurable modern condition." In this way Penkov and Kassabova both confirm and destroy certain eastern European stereotypes and, at the same time, negotiate them for their western readers. It seems they continue the liberation which 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 that enables a change of perspectives without taking sides. For most 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 themselves in the Otherness of Penkov's representations of the east – "East of the West."

In her book *Twelve Minutes of Love. A Tango Story* (2011), Kassabova seems to have gone beyond this problem of the English language, a language that is both national and cosmopolitan. Kassabova tells the story of an around-the-world journey. Going from one big city to another and dancing the tango in every possible country, makes this dance a living and creative nostalgia. Dancing tango might be "an Osties" [sic!] 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" (118). In allusion to Marshall McLuhan's "global village," Kassabova speaks, in her book's Dedication, 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, tango is omnipresent in a different way because it is not a language, but an 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. (9)

The tango dance originated in Argentina (Kassabova keeps questioning this, too). It was invented in the days of modernism, in the 1920s, and expresses a variety of desires that strive for fulfilment. 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 communication among a group of people who identify with it. It is, in one of Kassabova's aphorisms, "the vertical expression of a horizontal desire" (3). 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.

The dance also expresses 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. (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 at the heart 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 the tango: a dance that is linked to a vision of modernity as a process of uprooting people from "home" and transporting them elsewhere. The dance, we are told, was initially danced by "unwashed men with knives and cowboy boots, dispossessed gauchos from the Pampa, de-racinated working-class immigrants from Europe, desperado sailors and the descendants of slaves. They did this in a sweaty melting pot of hope and despair" (23). This "society of immigrant labourers," men without women and money, invented "the dance of their lives, because there was no dance that spoke for them" (23). Kassabova's history of the origins of tango, engenders 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 no longer available. This desire becomes englobed by the minutes. *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. Kassabova writes: "Tango and its nascent community here accept 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" (23).

Kassabova's utopian approach is not a yearning for fulfilment. She cannot retrieve the losses that inspire her. Her nostalgia is a point of departure, not an end to the hope for a new 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, habitually dancing out of this nostalgic melancholia and into an imagined world of beauty.

The decolonizing tradition of the dance claims recognition of national difference and independence. In this sense, tango does not represent the nostalgia of a colonizer who has lost power, but the nostalgia of the disenfranchised who strive for empowerment:

Exoticism is a potent tool when in the hands of imperialists. It allows the colonizer to handle paradoxical colonial situations, precisely the material out of which imperialist power reproduces and sustains itself. Exoticism seduces both the colonizer and the colonized, as the tangueros

clearly foresaw. The counterpart to the colonizer's fascination is the taste of empowerment experienced by the colonized. (Savigliano 144)

The Orientalist element in western perceptions of eastern Europe finds its equivalent in the exoticism that the colonized have long been associated with. The colonized anticipate the fascination with tango in the same way that Kassabova claims her eastern European origin to be a site of physical independence of culture and language. While "dancing was thought to reveal the instinctual nature of women, their truth communicated by physical means" (103), Kassabova does not accept her dancing to be gendered in this way. She sees the physical expression of tango as one that transgresses boundaries of gender and ethnicity or culture, and rejects any hierarchy based on power. While tango and the English language become transcultural sites, leaving home and going from a former state-socialist country to a western one may also result in the kind of nostalgia that aspires to a return home.

This is in many respects the story of the Czech writer Jan Novak. He took on the challenge of returning to his home country in a classical move not unlike that of a postcolonial search for identity. "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 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 paves the quickest way to fulfil the desires of nostalgia. Beauty is not tango, but Prague. Like 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" (7).

Novak wrote 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 represents himself as looking for "something there" that he may be attached to in the same physical way that Kassabova describes when talking about the corporeal experience of being at home wherever the tango is.

Novak speaks of how difficult it was for him to change language. He dreamt "the classic émigré dreams of being trapped in the old country" (8) in English but still could not write in the language. When it happened, switching to 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" (8). In reversal of this experience with language, Novak calls the chance of his children learning Czech "the sweetest thing". These linguistic shifts stand 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" (10). In quite a stereotypical way, Novak believes Americans to personify a modern lack of belonging. While the English language signifies "the growth of the unknown within," (11) he hopes to slow down this process by exposing his family to "the Operatic Beauty of Baroque Prague" (11) for a limited period of time.

When introducing his readers to Prague, Novak uses American English in a similar way 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 the Golem and uses style and metaphor to place it within 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" (20). In Novak's writing, Prague becomes a palimpsest in a double sense. English American creates a place of contemporaneity and modernity, while the narratives and images of national identity signify a nostalgic approach to telling stories about various cultures and languages that merged over centuries. This method of going all the way from the medieval to the postmodern faces of contemporary Prague is reminiscent of Alfred Thomas, for whom Prague is



a *palimpsest*: his 2010 book is significantly entitled *Prague Palimpsest: Writing, Memory, and the City*. For Novak, nostalgia is a modern condition in Bonnett's sense. In his book Prague emerges as the transcultural place that the Novaks were looking for when they moved to Illinois. On the one hand, returning to Prague is the recognition of the home city as a transcultural and cosmopolitan place; a transposition of western concepts onto the ancient capital. On the other hand, Novak's emigration is different from the cosmopolitan world of Kassabova or from Penkov's cultural in-betweenness that merges American and Bulgarian elements.

Comparing Novak, Penkov, and Kassabova, we can say that Penkov's stories about Bulgaria succeed in turning against their inherent nostalgia, while Novak's non-fiction seems to be caught up in it. Novak has an autobiographical approach and writes shortly after the end of the Cold War. His text is almost a historical and cultural guidebook to Prague as a palimpsest. This might be the reason why it is more difficult for him to escape the old national grievances and fears which would ensure that nostalgic melancholia does not surge up from the narrative. When Penkov, for instance, tells the story of the Bulgarian territorial losses to Serbia (27) or the five hundred years of Ottoman occupation and forty years of Communist rule (139), the reader does not sense any nostalgic melancholia about the "loss" of national "greatness" on his part. On the other hand, there is a modicum of historical exoticism that may reaffirm his western readers' preoccupations and stereotypes about south-east Europe. In contrast, Novak identifies with the Czech nation's grievances, collapsing the country's history and its present. He regards the by-gone glory of the now VW-owned Skoda as a "paradox of history" (30), since it was Hitler who founded Volkswagen long after Emil von Skoda's pioneering achievement (30). For obvious reasons, Kassabova is not likely to be troubled by stories of past glory in her "tango" book. She is not concerned with the "paradox of history" (30) that Novak deplors because she tries to avoid national identification altogether.

In conclusion, one could argue that loss of home and loathing nostalgia in the English writing of central and eastern European migrant writers after 1989 is closely linked to the 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 behind, but it cannot protect them from nostalgia either on the side of English-speaking readers, who see some of their ideas of eastern Europe confirmed, or on the part of the exiles, who try to reattach the individual and collective "scar tissue ... to something there" in their former home countries (Novak 7). Loathing nostalgia is omni-present in the three texts discussed. The conclusions that these three writers draw are quite different, however. Penkov habituates the tension between nostalgia for his original identity and the escape from the melancholia it generates. English becomes the medium through which one can change from one side to the other. Kassabova does not trust English to achieve this and, therefore, manages to make nostalgia a modern condition of exploring globalized spaces where "a world of beauty" can be experienced in/through tango. Tango makes the body a cosmopolitan site of physical expression that escapes the hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, or language. Novak removes the suffocating layers of the state-socialist past from the palimpsest of Prague's history by ascribing western concepts of modernity to the capital. English helps restore the central European home as a cosmopolitan place that represents a transcultural national identity which is part of the west, but is also informed by feelings of loss and melancholia.

The writers discussed in this article manage quite differently to loathe nostalgia and to transform western concepts of eastern European "Otherness" into visions of a shared modernity.

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