*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*
ISSN 1481-4374
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 3 (2001) Issue 1 Article 5

# Testimonial Poetry in East European Post-Totalitarian Literature

Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva
*City University of New York*

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies.
Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

## Recommended Citation

Lutzkanova-Vassileva, Albena. "Testimonial Poetry in East European Post-Totalitarian Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.1 (2001): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103>

This text has been blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.
The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 627 times as of 11/04/13. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

# *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (ISSN 1481-4374), the peer-reviewed quarterly of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, is published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University online in full text and in open access. The journal publishes scholarship following tenets of the disciplines of comparative literature and cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies" in a global, international, and intercultural context and with a plurality of methods and approaches: papers for publication are invited to <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/submit.html>; for the aims and scope of the journal consult <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebaims>; for the journal's style guide consult <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebstyleguide>. In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series* <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/library>. Work published in the journal is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, in Humanities International Complete, and in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America. *CLCWeb* is member of The Council of Editors of Learned Journals <http://www.celj.org> and it is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. *CLCWeb* is mirrored on the website of the British Comparative Literature Association <http://www.bcla.org/clcweb/>, it is preserved at research libraries in the Stanford University lockss system <http://www.lockss.org/lockss/>, and it is archived in the *Electronic Collection* of *Library and Archives Canada* <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/electroniccollection/>. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is affiliated with the Purdue University Press hard-copy monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies and selected papers of the journal are published in thematic annuals in the series <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/comparativeculturalstudies.html>.
Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

---

**_CLCWeb_ Volume 3 Issue 1 (March 2001) Article 5**
**Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva,**
**"Testimonial Poetry in East European Post-Totalitarian Literature"**
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss1/5>

---

**Contents of _CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture_ 3.1 (2001)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss1/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article, "Testimonial Poetry in East European Post-Totalitarian Literature," Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva reexamines the belief that postmodern literature and deconstructive writing have parted literary and theoretical discourse from reality, thereby obstructing and annihilating our access to history. Lutzkanova-Vassileva exemplifies her prognosis in an inquiry into post-totalitarian and postmodern Bulgarian literature and its texts of poetry. Born in the turmoil of communism's debacle, the analysis is an attempt to illustrate that, contrary to denying reference, postmodernism solely rejects the reduction of reference to a world that is perceptible and cognitively masterable. Rethinking what many have seen as a self-referential literature, with the break between language and reality -- its leading stylistic principle, Lutzkanova-Vassileva seeks to establish that in the very decomposition of artistic language, in the demise of its capacity to refer to phenomenal reality and endow it with meaning, the truth of another, so far suppressed reality emerges. This, she claims, is the reality of crisis and catastrophe, the reality of minds on the brink of disintegration, the reality of both historical and personal invalidation. Recording the stories of failing minds and chronicling breakdown after breakdown, the often incoherent, almost clinical discourse of the postmodern text in Bulgarian literature, Lutzkanova-Vassileva argues, provides powerful testimony to a climactic moment in contemporary history.

**Albena LUTZKANOVA-VASSILEVA**

## Testimonial Poetry in East European Post-Totalitarian Literature

Postmodern literature and deconstructive writing have often been viewed as following the creed that language cannot properly refer to and accurately register the world. In the minds of many, postmodernism has come to signify the detachment of literary discourse from reality, the obstruction and annihilation of our access to history. The study of postmodern literary texts is thus invariably accompanied by a peculiar uneasiness around what postmodernism termed the loss of reality and by the uncanny sensation of letting reality slip through our fingers without being able to arrest its flow. The ensuing study of testimonial poetry in post-totalitarian and postmodern Bulgarian literature is an attempt to illustrate that, contrary to denying reference, postmodernism solely rejects the reduction of reference to a world that is perceptible and cognitively masterable. In the paper I discuss ways in which the often unintelligible writings of postmodern authors in Bulgaria, overwhelmed by the sudden annulment of the widely perceived as impending and endless communist bliss, provide powerful testimony to a climactic moment of history that has failed to attain an immediate and direct registration in the human mind. Rethinking what many have seen as a self-referential literature, with the break between language and reality -- its leading stylistic principle, I will seek to establish that in the very decomposition of artistic language, in the demise of its capacity to refer to phenomenal reality and endow it with meaning, the truth of another, so far suppressed reality emerges. This is the reality of catastrophe and crisis, the reality of minds on the brink of disintegration, the reality of both historical and personal invalidation. Recording the stories of failing minds and chronicling breakdown after breakdown, the often incoherent, almost clinical discourse of postmodern literary writings, I argue, provides reliable representation of Bulgarian history's vicissitudes and their overwhelmingly traumatic impact on the psyche. Trauma and catastrophe, often confined to the years of communist terror, will therefore be seen as the aftermath of the unanticipated onset of Bulgarian post-totalitarianism, an event which, despite its indisputably positive gist, I suggest, produced a mass-scale traumatic experience, a collective cultural pathology. Bulgarian postmodern literature, I argue, documents the traumatic historical impact of the past decades, when, overwhelmed by the sudden abrogation of the communist system of ideologic control and its overnight substitution by a reality exceeding by far the capacities of human mind to grasp it and the powers of imagination to picture it, the subject experienced a severely stressful condition, a massive emotional shock, an intense psychic trauma. A powerful testimony to the ramifications of the calamitous debacle of communist utopia, postmodern Bulgarian writing discards as unwarranted the mourning over the postmodern eclipse of reality and the subject's faculty to represent it. While unequivocally denying reference to the phenomenal world, late-twentieth-century Bulgarian literature represents a new means of reading catastrophies and a new promise of enabling historic memory to prevail over forgetting.

**The Striptease of Totalitarian Concepts**

The play with totalitarian clichés, governed by the intent of their ultimate unveiling and unabridged annihilation, emerges as a paramount practice of post-communist poetics. While my analysis focuses mainly on the Bulgarian embodiment of this phenomenon, it seems imperative to note that the striptease of ideological clichés acquires greatest potency in the postmodern literature of Russia. What critics have widely labeled "Russian Conceptualism" flourished as a leading school in the artistic milieu of Russia in the1970-80s, after official Soviet censorship became abolished. Today it is a dominant development in Russian culture, presented by such poets as Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Timur Kibirov, and Mikhail Sukhotin. It may not be merely coincidental that the major figure of what might, for matter of convenience, be named "Bulgarian Conceptualism," Bojko Lambovski, spent considerable time in the 1980s as a graduate fellow of the Maksim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow, Russia. A powerful testimony to the invalidation of the formerly omniscient ideological constructs emerges in the poetry of Dmitri Prigov, one of the leading representatives of the Russian conceptualist school. Prigov's "Screaming Cantata (Who Killed Stalin)" exposes the widely celebrated communist cliché of the unanimous and enthusiastic

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

consent demanded on every directive of the omnipotent Party and Leader, regardless of whether it bears any relation to reality whatsoever: "The point is not who killed him -- just, killed and / killed! The point now is how we're going to agree. Let's / sing. O.k., so let's all do it together: Yes! Yes! Yes! / Yes-yes! Yes! -- you answer me, but somehow discordantly / and without confidence... / ... O.k., once more, only all together: / You killed!" (108). The whole poem is a performance of unfaltering consensus on certain issues whose relevance to reality is rendered altogether insignificant and is therefore dismissed. The poem is reduced to a series of imperatives, to a multiplicity of voices indiscriminately screaming the "You killed!" line to everything they are asked, until the lyrical hero, in the true spirit of the communist dictate to obey the will of the people, sacrificially accepts the guilt for all the major murders in the history of Russia: "Who killed Pushkin?/ You killed!/ No, really! -- no!/ You killed!/ No really, it's my joke!/ You killed!/ ... / Who killed Lermontov?/ You killed!/ Me again?/ You killed!/ No, really, no!/ .../ Who-who killed Stalin?/ You killed!/ No, no, I wasn't doing any killing!/ .../ YoukilledIkilledyoukilledikilledyoukilledikilledyoukilled --/ ikilledyoukilledikilledyoukilledikilledyoukilledikilledyoukilled -- ikilledyoukilledikilledyoukilledikilled/ I killed him!" (Prigov, "Screaming Cantata" 109-15).

Another hackneyed totalitarian cliché, disclosed by Prigov, evinces the quintessential for the communist doctrine tenet that ideas are superior to reality and as such represent the driving force for its radical transformation. As staged in Prigov's "From Reagan's Image in Soviet Literature," ideals not only enjoy the privileged status of governing reality; they hold the unequaled power to determine human biological existence and satisfy man's most fundamental physiological needs. The shameful, egotistic material goals of the West accede to the glory of Russia's ideal, spiritual inspirations which, by virtue of their higher nature, prove altogether capable of sustaining human life, substituting even for the lowly nature of capitalist food: "Reagan doesn't want to feed us / Well, OK, it's really his mistake / It's only over there that they believe / You've got to eat to live / But we don't need his bread / We'll live on our idea..." (Prigov 104). In the attempts to delineate the scope of postmodern referentiality, Lambovski's 1991 verse collection *Alen Dekadans* (*Red Decadence*) offers valuable insights. Under communism, the governing literary method of socialist realism was entrusted with the mission to impose, control, and transform everyday reality to the point where it ultimately merges with the sublime communist ideal. Disclosing the absurdity of the socialist realist practice, Lambovski strips naked the communist clichés, disrobes them of their semiotic apparel, laying bare the inadequacy of the creed that ideological constructs can serve as command models for reality. Wrenched of its signification, exhausted from bearing the imperious and specious ideological mask, and wearied of prevaricating reality, the language of Lambovski's verse is now evading reference to it. It is in this sense that *Alen Dekadans* readily yields to a demarcation as a poetry of names and verbal structures with nothing behind them, a play with empty language amidst the rubble of previously functional totalitarian realities and signs. The disconcerted raving of ideological clichés, however, redeems another, emphatically traumatic reality of the recent historical past, when communist stereotypes became abolished with nothing meaningful to substitute for them.

Lambovski's 1991 poem "Kolaps" ("Collapse," *Alen Dekadans* 4-5) emerges as persuasive vindication of this claim. The work activates a semantically rich plethora of meanings -- it is concurrently a story of historical, linguistic, and psychological collapse. The poem consists of a series of widely popular communist clichés, of formulas that, in the course of decades, dictated the life of children and adults alike. A reader privy to the communist poetics would immediately recognize the clichés that crammed in newspapers and textbooks, the slogans blared out from street loudspeakers and national broadcasts. "Kolaps" begins in unintelligible monosyllables ("i / ko / pukh"), then turns into a list of ideological stereotypes, and ends in a complete breakup of language and disintegration of meaning. The catalogue of clichés opens with "the tomorrow of our dreams" ("mechtanoto utre"), a key formula evoking the promised future of the communist bliss. It then proceeds with the enumeration of widespread ideological constructs: "the young pioneer is a diligent child" [pioneer is the communist version of the boy scout], "Always ready!" (here a salutation announcing one's preparedness to obey the imperatives of the Party), "I am Timur and

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

his group of warriors" (proclaiming an allegiance to an ideologically inspired pioneer's group connected with the mythology of the Mongol warlord Timurlane), "I'm the Youngest son of the Party" (coming straight from *The Young Guard*, Alexander Fadayev's widely read work, teaching the youngsters complete self-denial in the name of the Party), "I am Come all of you, thousands young men" (evoking a famous song that summoned the youth to participate in the construction of communist Bulgaria) ("chavdarcheto e primerno dete," "vinagi gotov," "az sum Timur i negovata komanda," "az sum Naj-malkiiat sin na Partiiata," "Az sum Elate khiliadi mladezhi"). "Kolaps" initiates a play with the ideological clichés, evincing their inadequacy and revealing the progressive loss of sanity they have induced: "I am the cat hanged in the name of the people," "I am the proletariat for dictatorship," "I'm Europe through which the specter roams, / a brave jet-propelled engine under a Soviet flag" (*Alen Dekadans* 4-5; my translation) ("az sum koteto, obeseno v imeto na naroda," "az sum proletariat za diktatura," "az sum Evropa, po koiato brodi prizrakut / smel reaktor pod sovetski flag"). The lyrical hero gradually transforms into a schizoid type raving delirious, barely intelligible words: "I am the totoLitarian schizophrenia. / I am a totElitearian schizoid type" ("az sum totoLitarnata shizofreniia / az sum totElitarniiat shizoiden tip"). Bewildered and disoriented, the subject finds him/herself unstuck in space and in time: "I am to the left to the right beneath above and sideways" ("az sum otliavo otdiasno otdolu otgore i otstrani").

The poem's finale enacts the complete decomposition of the subject's ego. We can hear a discourse of the Other, language speaking by itself, the voice of no one coming straight from the abyss of the unconscious. The lyrical hero has fully disintegrated and so has his/her speech. What we see on the page is a list of senseless words, figures, arithmetic signs, passport registers, and various acronyms. Next to each other are the abbreviated names of different parties, organizations, and even of department stores, the Union of the Democratic Forces, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, NATO, the European Economic Community, the Central Department Store, and so on, the year in which the Bulgarian state was founded, the year communist rule was established, figures and percentages reflecting norms in communist planned economy, etc.: "IVD KMR TSUM SGNS / AONSU AUAKS SIV NATO / SBP UBO SDS ASO BSP ALF / PETAK 13 / & 22 / 0 39 / 681-1944 / 99,99% za! / N 00856331 / EGN 6003136922." Sloughing off all pathetic definitions of socialist reality, droning the unabashed voices extolling its bogus glory, the poem concludes with a mathematical equation, stating that infinity roughly equals zero and, possibly, implying that the grandiose plans for the bright and joyous communist future have resulted in complete and irreversible collapse. A compendium of emptied ideological clichés and often flagrantly delirious babble, *Alen Dekadans* seems to repudiate any recourse to what we have grown accustomed to label as "reality." A self-sustenance of poetry on pure ideas is what we read in Lambovski's deliberate flight from the strongholds of the communist world. Amidst the comfort of such interpretation, however, the agony one feels in the often schizophrenically disrupted verses alerts to the presence of another, not so tangible, reality. If we consider reality in all its intricate and unpredictable identities rather than reduce it to the narrow realm of the empirical, observable, and cognitively masterable world, an altogether novel inquiry appears tenable: What if the celebrated closure of phenomenal reality, that is, the reality apparent to and perceptible by the senses, is concurrently an opening to another, non-perceptual reality -- the reality of trauma, catastrophe, and crisis? Would the break of language with reality's diverse modes of existence mark the point of birth of another of its infinite protean manifestations?

**The Traumatized Mind and the *modus vivendi* of Post-Futurity**

An alternative way of reading postmodern Bulgarian literature antithetical to its customary reading as self-referential would be as a literature that testifies to the reality of psychic trauma. As critics have defined it, psychic trauma represents "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11). The recognizing of a trauma problematic in the often inscrutable, yet seemingly joyous design of Bulgarian poetry suggests the possibility of a history which is not straightforwardly referential, that is, not reflecting in a direct way man's experience and comprehension of the world. Using Caruth's claims, such a rethinking of reference is "aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (11). A look into the event of totalitarian breakdown elicits all of the aforementioned characteristics. Sudden and unforeseen in its nature, the changeover of ideological regimes and the invalidation of life-configuring values overwhelmed and paralyzed the mind. After decades of totalitarian stagnation, deemed unending and immutable, history embarked on an unprecedentedly accelerated course. For example, "Historical perspective collapsed, and we felt ourselves carried off into some kind of Beyond," Mikhail Epstein attests to the Soviet downfall (*After the Future* 71) and Stefan Tsanev affirms this from the Bulgarian perspective when he says that "as a sand colossus / the great experiment of our age collapsed" ("Kato kolos ot piasuk / se sgromoliasa / velikiiat eksperiment na veka") (18; my translation). The breath-taking shift from a communist system of beliefs to a new, yet fully unknowable one, occurred too soon for the unprepared mind. Hence the mind's failure to register the event and turn it into an experience that has been lived out; hence the unparalleled magnitude of its traumatizing impacts on the psyche. Escaping registration by the mind, the unforeseen ideologic downfall remained largely unavailable to consciousness and unmastered by cognition, an unfathomable episode in history the mind failed to give weight to and comprehend.

The failure of the subject to attain an understanding of communism's overnight collapse and its speedy supersedure by an abstruse post-totalitarian order turns pivotal in demarcating the thematic scope of the Bulgarian postmodern verse. Overpowered by the unforeseen and fast-arriving change, the lyric hero feels unable to decode the truth of his/her rapidly evolving world: "Something terrible / people say / has happened" ("Neshto strashno / bilo kazvat / stanalo"), Ani Ilkov's character confides, disclosing utter incapacity to apprehend reality, and trusting the word of others (44). "Not remembering, not thinking, not knowing, not living" ("bez / da pomnish da mislish da znaesh" (Ilkov 44), the hero finds himself submerged in an impenetrable mental maelstrom and feels completely impotent to reconstruct his former biographical experience. Meaning falls apart: "So what did I want to say? / Whom did I want to pray? / Where did I want to go? / Why??" ("ta ... Ta kakvo / iskakh da kazha? Kogo / iskakh da molia? Kude / iskakh da ida? Zashto") (Ilkov 42), the lyric hero falters in dismay. Utterly confused and disoriented, he starts to doubt and question even his proper, personal existence: "Maybe it was me whom they killed? And I am no longer alive, but just thinking I am alive" ("Mozhe bi men sa / ubili? I ne sum veche zhiv / a samo taka si mislia") (43; my translation). "It is ultimately in the ways in which it exceeds simple understanding," Caruth explains, that the "address that takes place in all the struggles to communicate traumatic experience opens up the possibility of what could be called a truly historical transmission" and she proposes that we only need to embrace the "difficult task of this historical listening" (*Trauma* 156). Another poem by Ilkov, "Mental Derangement" ("Umopomrachenie" 65), reveals to the attentive reader the subject's psychic entrapment and corporeal dislocation through both its semantic and syntactical levels. The poem commences with an ominous foreboding: "I'll never be able to get out of here? ("az niama nikoga da mog' da se izmukna") (65). This frightful prognosis forms a recurring poetical motif which opens and closes each one of the stanzas, and reemerges within it as the implacable malediction of a third person singular: "You are not able to get out of here" ("ti ne mog' da se izmuknesh"). The second stanza is an almost exact repetition of the first one, only the order of the verses has been reversed. This mirror image creates on the structural level a feeling of entrapment, precluding all prospects for fleeing the vicious circle in which the hero's distraught thought moves chaotically. The last line of the poem endows the predicament to dwell in an infinite and meaningless present within a greater and nearly cosmic dimension: "I know there's no God to help me get out" ("I znam che niama bog da se izmukna"). In the face of such quandary, the lyrical hero's question "Why am I here? Why am I so much here?" ("zashto sum tuk zashto sum tolkoz tuka") obtains almost tragical overtones. Lost in an ineffably ambiguous universe, the subject floats around by spatial laws that have been irredeemably reversed: "In town I'm a horse fallen down in the sky… / I'm flying with my ears downward, oh, I'm a raven" ("v grada sum padnal kon v nebeto… / letia s ushi nadolu o, sum garvan").

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

Temporally and spatially destabilized by the vertiginous course of history, and hurled beyond the confines of his/her future and death, the subject finds him/herself deprived of any reference points, "all of a sudden," as Ivajlo Ditchev puts it, "detached from death and eternity" (110). "Where am I? In some other world? In some other times?" (29-30) ("Kude sum?? / V drug niakoj sviat li? / V drug niakoj vek?"), Tsanev anxiously demands in his 1997 verse collection *Stupki po oblatsite* (*Steps on the Clouds*): "I'm running on the white clouds. / Below me gapes the black coffin of the Earth … / The Earth is flying (it is not clear -- forward or backward?) / It is falling to the dark celestial womb. / It is falling like a huge blue tear-drop / shed from the eye of God" (32; my translation). Yordan Eftimov's 1993 book of poetry *Metametafizika* (*Metametaphysics*) is even more graphical in rendering Ditchev's claim and in portraying the disconnection of the subject "from death and eternity": "On one planet people had no vestibular apparatusses. / They could not differentiate between up and down, forward and backward. / They knew even less what sidewards was. / They were just floating in space" (11; my translation) ("Na edna planeta khorata niamali vestibularni / aparati. Ne mozheli da razlichavat gore i dolu, / nito napred / i nazad, / a oshte po-malko vstrani. / Prosto si leteli"). It is this anchorless floating in time and space that Ditchev debates in his 1990 essay "The Post-Paranoid Condition," where he says that "the ultimate sense of the new, postmodern, postparonoid democracy means no power, no walls, and borders, no progress, nothing -- just being there, forever" (117; my translation).

Before I proceed with my inquiry into an analysis of trauma-induced post-communist poetry, it seems imperative to forward an important stipulation. It would be altogether redundant to claim that all post-totalitarian Bulgarian literature can testify to the realities of psychic trauma that accompany the events of momentous historical changes. What I seek to establish is, rather, that, within post-communist literary production, a large corpus of gruesome and trauma-engendered writings exists and plays a defining historical part. It must, however, be noted that the younger poetic generation increasingly demonstrates a refusal to engage in political clichés and ideologically related realities and, instead, indulges in an unprecedented playfulness and experimentation of verse. To illustrate my point, here are two examples from the work of two of the youngest Bulgarian poets. The first example is by Jordan Eftimov: "I play with my cat / or she plays with me / or the play plays with us / or language plays with the play / or I play with language / or language plays with the cat?" (15; my translation) ("S kotka si igraia az / ili igrae si sus mene tia / ili igrata si igrae s nas / ili ezikut si igrae sus igrata / ili (puk az) igraia si s ezika / ili ezikut si igrae s kotka"). Here, the poem is rendered in a variety of languages (e.g., Russian) and multifaceted perspectives. My second example is from Georgi Gospodinov's *Lapidarium* where the poet partakes in an analogous linguistic enterprise. In "P-R-A-S-K-O-V-A" (*Lapidarium* 61), the poet skillfully juggles the word's mellow vowels with its strident consonants: "How huge and plump to the point of bursting out is this word /a-o-a /. P-r-s-k is making crunching sounds, nibbled by someone as accidental as the summer" (61; my translation) ("Kakva ogromna i zakruglena / do prusvane / e tazi duma /a-o-a/ p-r-s-k khrupti nagrizana ot niakoj / sluchaen kato liatoto").

**The Temporal and Psychological Displacements of the Post-Totalitarian Subject**

As I have already suggested, seminal for defining as traumatic the changeover event is the suddenness and unexpectedness with which it occurred as well as the mind's absolute unpreparedness to register and assimilate the abrogation of a largely perceived as upcoming, yet unattained ideological regime. Vladislav Todorov suggests that "the common idea that communism was impending prevented us from seeing that we were actually in it" and that "all the key metaphors of communist utopia have turned into reality" (*Post-Theory* 66), thus attesting to the ways in which the already solidified perception of communism as forthcoming precluded the subject's revelation that she/he had long been living in it and that the utopia so zealously strived to achieve had actually been fulfilled. In a similar stance, in "Stupki po oblatsite," Tsanev grapples to rationalize the unforeseen collapse of an allegedly looming and everlasting regime: "We thought communism will last forever. / The other alternative was a third world war. / But this meant that together with communism all mankind would disappear. / Hush! Go to sleep! Go to sleep!" (13-14; my translation) ("Nij mislekhme, che komunizmut shte e vechen / Drugiiat izkhod / be treta svetovna vojna / No tova oznachavashe / zaedno s komunizma / da izchezne i chovehestvoto?/

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

Sht-sh-sh-sh-t! / Na-ni-na! / Na-ni-na / Na"). The stanza closes in disintegrated meaning, offering no solace to the troubled mind. With the unforeseen attainment of the communist regime, the subject has been unexpectedly transposed beyond the borders of an already achieved and consummated future. This reversal of the modes of temporality and the accelerated pace at which it overruled the subject's imminent reality in fact translates the traumatic dislocation into a cognitively undigestable experience. Within the short span of just a few years, the subject has been forced to psychically incorporate experience that overflows the limits of entire human lives. It is in this sense that postmodern poetry in Bulgaria can be read as a recompensated surplus of historic reality that has blinded the subject. The dehistorization of the mind is a result of the process of the dislocation and disposing of cognitively undigestable realities.

The struggle of the subject to cleanse his/her mind of these obtrusive, troubling, and totally ungraspable realities translates into a plethora of images and literary tropes. Among the most memorable from the rich arsenal of poetic imagery is the persistent vision of an emptied future, a gargantuan eschatologic voidness repealing man's life-long pursuit of the promised communist bliss. The sudden discovery of having attained, and subsequently cancelled, the future is conveyed in Lambovski's poem "Planina" ("Mountain," *Alen Dekadans* 30-32). In this poem, the author plays with the stereotype of the man who tries to climb a mountain, in haste, to conquer its aerial top. The poem reads as a parable of the enthusiastic person rushing to arrive at the aspired communist heights. However, instead of the shining forth of the longed-for ideal, presumably marked by a sunrise, the crest of the mountain greets the climber with the sun already in red, declining -- significantly, *Alen Dekadans* / *Red Decadence* is chosen by the author as the title of the volume. Having reached the top, the lyrical hero finds himself fully at a loss: "I am standing on top of the mountain. / I am looking around. / Now what? / Where to? / The mountain is silent" (31; my translation) ("Stoia na vurkha. Vurtia ochi. / Sega kakvo, nakude? / Mulchi planinata"). No matter how hard he tries, the hero is unable to resolve the questions posed to him by a reality attained precociously. He is yet to realize that, in a frenzied hurry to achieve his goal, he has overtaken it without the chance to even notice and acknowledge it.

The sun is a central image in another major work of contemporary post-totalitarian writing, in Kiril Merdzhanski's play *Tirezij slepiiat* (*Tiresias the Blind*). The play was staged in the winter of 1998-1999, at the Sfumato playhouse in Sofia, Bulgaria. As is known, by the early 1980s many notions of communism turned into forced realities within the framework of totalitarian society throughout the Soviet empire. Similarly, in Bulgaria, starting with the early 1980s official rhetorics propagated the notion that communism was still impending, unattained, and yet to come. A testimony to this temporal prevarication is in *Tirezij slepiiat* through the central motif of the play -- the motif of the sun that refuses to either rise or go down. As the play unfolds, the audience becomes aware of a straightforward identification of the sun with time: "But just like the Sun / time stays motionless too!" (25; my translation) ("No kato Sluntseto / i vremeto stoi zastinalo!"). This "immobility" of the sun evokes the frozen temporal dimension of late communism's artificially invented time (the void of meaning in decades of simulated temporality and sociohistoric periods of nonexistent time as expressed in the notions of "actual socialism," "developed socialism," accelerated socialism," etc.). In other words, the arrogant manipulation of the temporal perspective endeavored to disguise the truth of communism's ultimate attainment and safeguard from the public the fact of its repeal. The play opens at Tiresias's sanctuary, where everyone, except the blind Tiresias, is looking at the sun. The sun, however, stays immovable, reluctant to advance to any new position -- it already sojourns "somewhere beyond" the past, but is unable to locate itself within the subject's future: "Pallid, and immobile,/ -- It stayed and didn't go away -- / -- It was visible -- but, in a way, it already seemed somewhere beyond -- / it stayed and didn't go away. / It didn't blind us so that we would see / the way we used to see? / Before or now? / I don't know? always?" (3; my translation) ("Izblednialo i zastinalo,?/ Stoeshe i ne si otivashe -- / I beshe vidimo ? no siakash veche be preminalo -- / stoeshe i ne si otivashe. / Ne zaslepiavashe da vizhdame taka, / tuj kakto vizhdakhme?/ Predi ili sega?/ Ne znaia? vinagi"). The entire play revolves around the theme of an abnormal sun, one that "neither rises, nor goes down," thus leaving people altogether at a loss. Unwilling to descend or rise, this sun becomes the object of

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

vehement polemics, played out in a multitude of contexts. The daughters of Jokasta and Oedipus -- Antigona and Ismena -- for example, in complete bewilderment and fright, remark: "Father! / Mother! / ? The sun has disappeared! / It is there, but at the same time it isn't! ? / It stays immobile!" (5; my translation) ("Antigona: Tatko! / Ismena: Mamo! / Antigona: Sluntseto go niama! / Ismena: Tam e, no go niama!?/ Antigona: Stoi!"). The condition of the sun thus directly relates to a state of bafflement and horror: "It stays ? and it doesn't go away, / perhaps it is already tired -- / and has even lost the desire to move. / And we can already clearly, more and more clearly see / how horror freezes the despondent faces" (4) ("A to stoi ? ne si otiva, / izglezhda se e umorilo -- / izgubilo e i zhelanieto da se dvizhi. / I veche iasno ... vse po-iasno vizhdame / kak uzhasut zastiva po unilite litsa"). The realization that the "bright communist reality" has arrived too soon, unanticipated by the subject who believed it to reside somewhere in the distant future, attributes almost cataclysmic nuances to the heroes' observations: "It grew dark too early" (6) and "I looked at the Sun -- / it was there ? / but was emptied out, / as if shining, but unable to lighten things up ? / just hanging there by itself / neither rising, nor going down" (12) ("Mnogo rano se smrachi" (6) / "Poglednakh Sluntseto -- to beshe tam ?/ ala izprazneno,/ uzh sveti, a ne osvetiava?/ visi si tam -- / i ne izgriava, ne zaliazva"). Ultimately, the play leads to its enlightening and long deferred epiphany: The heroes suddenly become aware of the fact that their future has been voided and annulled, and they have long ago begun to live as victims of ideological manipulation and deception. In its final judgement, Merdzhanski's play is definitive: Oedipus, the tsar, has to prick his eyes out and lose sight forever, the gods have to leave the sacred Olympus, so that the eyes of everyone else can recover their vision and the sun can once again rise and go down, resuming its regular cycle. With the seemingly upcoming ideological dream so inopportunely consummated, the post-totalitarian subject faced the exhortative need to survive his/her own, premature demise.

**Witnessing and Testimony: History Stored in Your Eyes**

Suspended in limbo, the subject inhabiting post-totalitarian reality is faced with yet another imperative -- to see and witness, eyes forcibly kept open. In Merdzhanski's *Oblachna zemia* (*A Cloudy Earth*, 1995), the act of witnessing and testifying is expressed thus: "By force of habit, in the night, the eyelid / drops down, but instantly bounds back again / prepared to absorb it all / The mud. And higher up -- / the borders of the universe./ Don't ask where the essence lies, / just watch and watch/ Touched by the duskiness,/ the eye dilates / just like a photographic plate" (27; my translation) ("Po navik v tumnoto klepacha / se spuska i nagore pak otskacha / s gotovnost vsichko da fiksira / Kalta. I po-nagore -- / granitsite na vsemira. / Ne pitaj sushtnostta kude e, / a samo gledaj, gledaj / Dokosnato ot mraka, / okoto se raztiaga / kato fotografska plaka"). Unleashing the vigor of discoursing voices, postmodern Bulgarian poetry perpetuates the gruesome images stored into one's eyes. It lets passive witnesses, those continually silenced singularities, perform and inscribe their intense traumatic memories. While inaccessible to the mind, the events of trauma become engraved on it, etched into the brain -- a historic recompense for the erasure of their normal encoding in memory. It thus seems only natural that the inexplicable stories imprinted on the mind do not, in the poetry studied, undergo a translation into meaningful imagery, but pour out as nonsensical babble, an inconsistent raving of traumatized bodies. Precisely this insistence on imparting the original, unfathomed traumatic experience, untarnished by the writer's comprehensibility, gives grounds for recognizing in postmodern Bulgarian poetry the truth of certain historical facts.

Death implacably invades the provinces of post-totalitarian literary production. Referring to the historically essential moment of man's traumatic transposition beyond the realm of an already possessed and consummated future, contemporary Bulgarian poetry abounds in texts saturated with lethal imagery and a premonition of death. For example, even a cursory glimpse at the titles of the poems included in Ani Ilkov's 1994 collection *Izvorut na groznokhubavite* (*The Spring of the Ugly-Beautiful*) suggests a preoccupation with death in a morbid ambience: "Grobishta / Graveyards," "Stikhove za smurtta / Verses about Death," "In Articulo Mortis," "Mir na tvoia prakh! / Peace on Your Soul!," "Against a Death / Sreshtu edna smurt," "Novoto grobishte v dushata mi / The New Graveyard in My Soul," "In Commemoration of the Heroes / Pomen za Geroite," etc.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

However, the psychic trauma to which these poems testify, I would like to emphasize here, is unrelated to Bulgaria's totalitarian history. Among the strongest vindications of the fact is the milieu of desolation and destruction haunting the verses of the youngest generation -- poets in their late twenties and early thirties, who never witnessed the atrocities of concentration camps or suffered totalitarian repression. It is a traumatic reality of an altogether different nature that these poets testify to. Inhabiting a world that is dismal and incomprehensible this generation of poets tell the story of a vertiginous and unanticipated psychic breakdown, of an intense and hopeless crisis of identity. The reader of this corpus of poetry is stunned by its exceptionally pictorial character. Long after reading the text, the reader remains haunted by the vivid image of the "Skull / with terrified / eye sockets" (Gospodinov 53), the baleful stare of its blackened pupils "filled with dirt instead of brains" (Tsanev 17), the cross-shaped poem of a soul that has just been crucified ("Here every stalk is a soul," Gospodinov 57), the death-bound voyage of the turtles headed for the solace of the sea, the apocalypse-portending shadows of the birds "soar[ing] above our heads [and] outlining a black cross over everything" (Tsanev 17), and so on. It seems impossible to disremember the pervasive morbidity of the world surrounding the reader: "Wind. Splashes of blood / on the green back of the grass. Poppies / with black in the middle. / With black in the middle. / With black in the middle" (Merdzhanski, *Oblachna zemia* 15) ("Viatur. Pruski kruv / po zeleniia grub / na trevata. Makove / s cherno v sredata. / S cherno v sredata. / S cherno v sredata"). It is this pictography postmodern poetics that alludes in yet another way to the traumatic nature of experience. Numerous studies on trauma have underscored the perceptual organization of an overwhelming event, at the expense of its semantic and verbal representation, as a paramount characteristic of traumatic memory par excellence. Visual images identify the dark areas of our mind for which we presently have no words, the silent territories for which meaningful words will appear only later.

**The Disarticulated Body**

The body and its dismemberment as focal themes in Bulgaria's contemporary writing are prevalent in the poetry of the country's youngest generation. In this poetry, the subject's split of identity and the traumatic impairment of his/her sensorium and cognition are frequently accompanied by the event of corporeal mutilation. Caruth proposes that "the mutilated invalid can be nothing other than the reassertion of reference" ("The Claims of Reference" 199). It appears plausible that the disarticulation of the body in Bulgarian poetry testifies to the disfiguration of society undergoing a grand-scale sociocultural crisis. For example, Eftimov writes "In this part of the book everything is stones / ears noses lips heads legs -- these are stones / the stones are also stones" (*Metametaphysics* 37) ("V tazi chast na knigata vsichko e kamuni / ushi nosove ustni glavi kraka -- tova sa kamuni / kamunite sushto sa kamuni"). Then, it seems only natural that a poem attesting to the psychic mutilation of the subject is built of disparate bodily ruins: "I can no longer catch up with my head!? Tsanev's lyrical hero screams in despair (7). The author then graphically renders a corporeal mangling quickly acquiring cosmic dimensions: "My body has sprawled like a blood-curdled puddle on the speechless Earth./ But my head runs away -- further and further away, further and further away./ It stretches my neck as a rubber band ?/ It jumps over the horizon ring./ It cuts loose and flies off, like a curly comet in the stone-deaf darkness of the Universe" (7; my translation) ("Tialoto mi se e prosnalo / kato susirena lokva / vurkhu zanemialata zemia / a glavata mi biaga -- / vse po-dalech / vse po-dalech / opuva shiiata mi kato lastik? / preskacha obrucha na khorizonta / otkusva se / i polita / kato kudrava kometa / v glukhiia mrak na Vselenata"). In Bulgaria's communist history -- as in all cultures under Soviet communist rule -- the body always contained a powerful referential potential. In the context of a society, whose innate homogamy precluded the sprouting of any alien offshoots from the uniform totalitarian ur-corpus, the "communal body, or the Mass Man," the integral "body-aggregate" operated as communism's best referent (Todorov, "Introduction" 83, 77). The pretended normalcy of corpora, welded harmonically together, testified to the homogenizing urge of a society resolved to obliterate uniqueness and engineer an amorphous, depersonalized, and communal subject. Thus, within the milieu of Bulgarian totalitarianism, the organically united body functioned as a most veracious referent to the totalizing urges of the communist society.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

While the intact wholeness of the body objectivized political power and was the ideal measure of communism, only the mutilated, terrorized, distorted, and dismembered body, twisting in its traumatic agony, could be the adequate touchstone of post-totalitarianism (see Kiossev). The excruciating condition of the human body operates as a sensitive litmus of the traumatizing conditions of reality. The subject is incapable to grasp the sudden supersedure of one symbolic order (communism) by another (post-totalitarianism). Man is not biologically programmed to rationalize the survival of his/her own death, to come to terms with the invalidation of his/her own future. Thus it is only through the engravings etched in the mind, through the indelible scars grooved in the body, that the impact of this traumatic reality speaks. To institute itself, every new regime must violently disfigure the body, force and brand it with its novel social laws. Therefore, only the terrorized body, brutally disarticulated and tattooed afresh, can be referential of the new, post-totalitarian, post-paranoid condition. "To be born, 'the world' was terrorized," Kiossev claims (137). Terror emerges as an inexorable orthopedist, ordaining the absolute disarticulation of the "distorted, nonfocused, mutant members struggl[ing] to break out" (Kiossev 144), extorting the radical mangling of the corpora that "danced, grimaced, and twisted in an effort to shed their tattoos and tear their own monstrous members engraved by totalitarian terror" (just to see their convulsions freeze in schizoid tics) (Kiossev 144-45). The body had to be disarticulated in order to articulate itself as novel one; it had to be traumatized in order to be born anew. In its most excruciating pain the body becomes most truly referential of its agonal post-futurity.

**Coda**

Scholars of trauma have not as of yet detected the groans of post-totalitarian writers. Nor have experts in Bulgarian scholarship discerned in post-1990 literature the symptoms of psychic trauma. Outwitting theorists, trauma emerged where least suspected -- in the bloom of history's healthiest event, the collapse of communism. It thus requires extreme sensitivity to discern in the euphoric shouts of social victory the terrifying screams of subjects who face an unforeseen psychic invalidation. It takes attentive listening to recognize traces of trauma in the celebration of art's deliverance from ideological and societal oppression. The surprising and unanticipated advent of a trauma problematic in post-totalitarian Bulgarian literature alerts us to the danger of not paying attention to an overwhelming psychic crisis in contemporary Bulgarian society and perhaps in all societies of the former Soviet hemisphere, now struggling to reclaim relevance on their own. Archiving the traumatic stories of a collective mental seism and all-embracing psychological annulment, the trauma-generated discourse of postmodern writers in Bulgaria emerges as compelling vindication of postmodernism's adamant commitment to register the critical developments in human history. These texts, often unintelligible and resistant to a hermeneutical decoding, relate the stories of the subject's dazing translocation beyond the realm of his/her unexpectedly attained and thus invalidated life and future. In doing this, they furnish an invaluable literary testimony to the subject's agonal suspension into the "somber space of […] futurelessness" (Kiossev 145) and his/her psychically traumatic *modus vivendi* of post-futurity.

**Works Cited**

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

Caruth, Cathy. "The Claims of Reference." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 4.1 (1990): 193-205.

Ditchev, Ivajlo. "The Post-Paranoid Condition." *Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance: The Bulgarian Case*. Ed. Alexander Kiossev. Albany: State U of New York P, 1995. 105-18.

Eftimov, Jordan. *Metametafizika* (*Metametaphysics*). Sofia: Svobodno poetichesko obshtestvo, 1993.

Epstein, Mikhail. *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1995.

Gospodinov, Georgi. *Lapidarium*. Sofia: modus Stoianov, 1993.

Ilkov, Ani. *Izvorut na groznohubavite: pesni i umotvoreniia na Ani Ilkov* (*The Spring of the Ugly-Beautiful: Songs and Creations of Ani Ilkov*). Sofia: Anubis, 1994.

Kiossev, Alexander. "An Essay on Terror." *Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance: The Bulgarian Case*. Ed. Alexander Kiossev. Albany: State U of New York P, 1995. 135-46.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103

Lambovski, Bojko. *Alen Dekadans* (*Red Decadence*). Sofia: Pan, 1991.
Merdzhanski, Kiril. *Tirezij slepiiat* (*Tiresias the Blind*). Manuscript.
Merdzhanski, Kiril. *Oblachna zemia* (*A Cloudy Earth)*. Sofia: Svobodno poetichesko obshtestvo, 1995.
Merdzhanski, Kiril. *Izbrani epitafii ot zaleza na rimskata imperiia* (*Selected Epitaphs from the Decline of the Roman Empire*). Sofia: c/o Jusautor, 1992.
Prigov, Dmitri. "From Reagan's Image in Soviet Literature." Trans. Andrew Wachtel. *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*. Ed. Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 104-06.
Prigov, Dmitri. "Screaming Cantata (Who Killed Stalin)." Trans. L. Hejinian and Elena Balashova. *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*. Ed. Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 108-15.
Todorov, Vladislav. "Introduction to the Political Aesthetics of Communism." *Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance: The Bulgarian Case*. Ed. Alexander Kiossev. Albany: State U of New York P, 1995. 65-94.
Todorov, Vladislav. *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination.* Albany: State U of New York P, 1995.
Tsanev, Stefan. *Stupki po oblatsite* (Steps on the Clouds). Sofia: Biblioteka 48, 1997.

Author's profile: Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva teaches English and comparative literature at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. Her major areas of interest are twentieth-century English (American, British), East European (Russian, Bulgarian), and Latin American literatures, critical theory, philosophy, semiotics, and culture. She is currently working on a project on testimonies of Western (American, British) and East European (Russian, Bulgarian) postmodernisms. The project challenges the increasingly popular belief that postmodern literature and deconstructive writing have separated literary and theoretical discourse from reality, thereby obstructing and invalidating our access to history, and reads the often incoherent production of postmodern writers as testimony to a traumatic post-industrial (technological) or post-totalitarian (ideological) reality. E-mail: <albenalv@brooklyn.cuny.edu>.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103