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Reading Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" in Post-communist Bulgaria

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Kornelia Slavova,
"Reading Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in Post-communist Bulgaria"
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Abstract: Kornelia Slavova, in her paper "Reading Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in Post-communist Bulgaria," discusses the intricate interrelations of texts and social practices in postcommunist Bulgaria by analysing Rosa Liksom's short story read by sixty readers. Further, Slavova proposes the study of the uses of stereotypes in fiction and their discursive hardening in extratextual practices at times of radical political and cultural change. With this notion, she focuses on two major stereotypical patterns concerning gender and the supranational opposition East/West. Slavova argues that the latter function as palimpsest structures on which earlier bipolar representations from the communist Cold-War era are still legible under the new postmodern and post-totalitarian ideological scripts -- superimposed on them over the last twelve years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In her conclusion, Slavova proposes that text and textual analysis play a significant role in cultural studies because they reflect, create, and recreate the fantasies and myths of a given culture, generating meaningful tension between the real and the imagined, the particular and the general, the practical and the theoretical.

Kornelia SLAVOVA

Reading Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" in Post-communist Bulgaria

In the current world of change and instability, described pervasively with concepts that rely on the prefix "post" such as postmodernist, poststructuralist, post-colonial, post-communist, post-Christian, post-feminist, post-theory and others, the role of the text is getting more and more difficult to determine. This article is an attempt to study the significance of the text and textual analysis for cultural studies in a post-textual electronic age dominated not by the word, but by the image, the body, and visual spectacle. Discussing the theoretical advances made possible by the encounter of cultural studies with structuralism, semiotics and poststructuralism, Stuart Hall draws attention to the role of language and textuality to produce "a necessary delay, a displacement" because of the difficulty to link them immediately and directly with other structures. Yet, Hall argues, "the shadow, the imprint, the trace of those other formations, of the intertextuality, of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, can never be erased from cultural studies" (1992 284).

More particularly, in this paper I look at the intricate interrelations of texts and social practices in a twofold manner: by studying the traces of various contextual determinants in text, as well as the discursive functioning of textual imprints -- especially stereotypes -- in extratextual practices. According to the *Webster's Collegiate* definition, a stereotype is "a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, affective attitude, or uncritical judgement" (1156). Unlike the archetype, which is universal, the stereotype operates in a particular time and place, and is conceived of as a relatively immutable type. The restriction of stereotypes to local attitudes is best seen in the etymology of the term: a stereotype is a stricture, literally a printer's mould cast in metal. In what follows, an attempt will be made to trace how such cultural strictures cast in words operate in cultures of transition and more particularly what happens to fixed and normative "stencils" of stereotypical thinking in the changing Bulgarian post-totalitarian context, witness to the explosion of all the above mentioned "post" conditions. I would argue that the effort to study stereotyping/stereotyped cultural constructs through fictional texts is worthwhile because it can reveal a lot not only about the evolution in literary processes, but also about the historical evolution of social attitudes and dominant forms of representation. Literature reflects and nourishes the fantasies and myths of a given culture relying on symbolic images, metaphors and stereotypes. It can both perpetuate and subvert various mythic and stereotypical patterns through texts, hence the multifaceted functioning of stereotypes in literature as simultaneously reflective, reflexive and mirroring. In *Difference and Pathology* (1985) Sander Gilman devotes a whole chapter to the question "What Are Stereotypes and Why Use Texts to Study Them?" He refers to numerous examples from world history to prove his point that texts provide us with a rich bounty of materials upon which to base our observations, but he also cautions that "texts must not be perceived as separate from the world that generated them" because, as he claims, they also "give us the key to decoding courses of action based upon the presuppositions inherent in our mental representation of the world" (242).

The reader reception data of Rosa Liksom's short story "We Got Married"

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/> in this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (Ed. Urpo Kovala), reveals how fiction can trigger reductive forms of stereotypical binary thinking but can also expose and dismantle such modes. Liksom's text provoked varied reader reactions concerning the validity of traditional nuclear family models, gender roles, generational patterns, ideological dogmas, and national values in transforming Eastern Europe at the threshold of the twenty-first century. My data for the analysis at hand is taken from the research project and the project's published material in *Reading Cultural Difference: The Reception of a Short Story in Six European Countries* (Ed. Urpo Kovala and Erkki Vainikkala).

Framing the Con/text of Analysis

Transition, etymologically speaking, is a passage from one place to another, a progress from one state or condition to another, a process of deep disordering and re-ordering of long-established norms and paradigms. Transition also implies the "in-betweenness" of the current East-European situation: between the organized state-managed political and cultural structures of communism (also referred to as socialism, totalitarianism and Soviet colonialism -- all problematic terms at present) and the newly emerging capitalist market-oriented economy and democracy. In fact, owing to its geographical location and historical developments, some critics see this complicated paradigm from the angle of post-colonial theory as "inbetween peripheral status," i.e., "East Central Europe as a periphery of two sides: the Western traditional influence and the former Soviet Union influence [operating] through the mechanism of a 'filtered' colonialism" (see Deltcheva <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss2/4/>; see also Tötösy). Again, from an etymological point of view, transition and transcendence go together. What limits and limitations are we to transcend now? The easiest way to describe the changes in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989 is perhaps as a kind of explosion of difference on all possible levels: political, cultural, ideological, ethnic and religious. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall difference had never been perceived as a synonym of richness and plenitude, it had been corrupted into opposition and/or inequality, often transcribed into Manichean Cold-War bipolar stereotypes such as friends vs. enemies, East vs. West, us vs. them, good vs. bad. Hence the greater significance of exploring stereotypical "strictures" in times of flux and radical change.

It looks like Bulgaria (and Eastern Europe as a whole) is now living in a kind of postmodern cultural situation. There are no specific directions, no "left" and "right" in conventional political terms, no specific borders to transcend. In many ways the connections to Lyotard's formula for the emergence of postmodernism are easy to make: our suspicion of both former and current "master metanarratives" (especially the fallen mythologies of communism and Marxism) as well as the organizing of differences, from centralized well-ordered structures into conflicting differences without any commonality or order. In this total chaos and vacuum of values, marked by hopes for a better democratic future and nostalgia for the security of the past, Bulgarian society seems to be at a major crossroads where all the possible roads to be taken, all the possible discourses, have already lost their legitimacy. If we consider communism an extremist form of modernism with its utopian emphases, its administrative rationality typical of the modernization process and the domination of one direction/ perspective, then, perhaps, we might find even more features in common between post-communist Eastern Europe and the postmodern West.

Reading is also often seen as a transcendent strategy (going beyond your immediate experience, beyond what you know) and it is a vital part of our interactive social and cultural environment. How can Liksom's postmodern text serve as a measuring rod for the recent developments in a post-communist culture? Her story, openly rejecting hierarchy, narrative closure and the desire to represent the authority of the author, provides a good jumping-off point for any analysis which stresses the multiplicity of interpretation or the unrestrainable freedom of the reader. Undoubtedly Liksom's text has the power to irritate, attack, challenge, and disturb. As Chris Pawling comments in his article "Liksom's Short Stories and the Ironies of Contemporary Existence" in the present issue of *CLCWeb*, the short story expresses some features of "the postmodern flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense," but it also expresses something more than the postmodern neutrality of pastiche or "empty parody," in Frederic Jameson's terms. The cutting edge of Liksom's implicit moral commitment is not lost, it is discernible in the ironic twist of the story and the overall point of view described by Pawling as "that of the avant-garde which embraces the authenticity of the street and life 'on the edge'" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/4/>.

In my opinion the story speaks in what Linda Hutcheon calls "a double-voiced irony" situating the reader in a position of simultaneous distance and engagement, inside and outside the text (114). With its clear-cut beginning, conflicts and resolution, reinforced by a linear action, the story automatically creates a horizon of expectations in the reader around recognizable conventions of genre, style and gender representation, and then destabilizes and dismantles them step by step. Thus the text "simultaneously inscribes and subverts prevailing conventions" (117) in Hutcheon's

terms trespassing generic, gender and cultural boundaries. Gradually the accumulated unpleasant concreteness, foul language and extreme violence in the text come to clash with the lyricism and symbolic abstraction expected from a supposedly romantic love story. Through irony and detachment the text produces a sense of disorientation in the reader arresting him/ her in the materiality of the text and the materiality of life. Because of this particular effect of the story bringing out the politics of representation by exposing and thus challenging various literary and cultural conventions, Liksom's writing is both aesthetically innovative and politically loaded. Therefore it could be said to belong in the radical art at the end of the twentieth century continuing earlier avant-garde traditions, although within a postmodern cultural condition, i.e., a kind of postmodern art of resistance and subversion whose aim is to investigate the processes controlling representation rather than represent, where under the "flat and affectless" surface lurks a felt failure to provide any cognitive grasp of causes and effects in the social totality as well as a felt need for a social change. In fact, the problem of locating Liksom's writing within a specific literary tradition (for example, the American "Blank Generation" or punk generation, or the radical visceral art in the US in the 1980s and 1990s) is somewhat irrelevant here, because the Bulgarian reading public was not familiar with these Western traditions at the time of the project fieldwork. What matters, however, is that Liksom's fictional text has triggered heated discussions about the contemporary everyday reality of Europe and the world, and has managed to provoke the spinning of the readers' cultural fantasies around bigger mimetic kernels such as nationality, ideology, cultural geography and gender.

Gender and Family Stereotypes

Empirical data show that, as a whole, Bulgarian respondents do not tend to generalize much on the basis of the characters, the author and/or the culture that a text originates from, they tend to treat them systematically as individual instances. Yet, parallelly to thinking in sophisticated rational categories that transcend the crude line of differences present in stereotypes, sometimes, in their desire to gain control over the disconcerting story, readers resort to reductive generalizations about marriage, the human condition, young people, men and women. Although stereotypes are usually considered simplistic overgeneralizations, as Gilman observes, "we cannot function in the world without them" (16). He further identifies at least five basic functions of stereotypes in psychological terms: to handle difference (the needed sense of difference between "self" and "object" (the Other), to keep our fears at a manageable distance, to preserve our illusion of control over the self and the world, to provide a sense of order, or to establish domination (economic, social, political, geographic and so on). Most of these mechanisms are easily observed in the Bulgarian responses, and some specific cases will be analysed in what follows.

The obvious imbalance in the relationships between the two characters in Liksom's text, and respectively between the two sexes, has provoked controversial comments mainly around gender issues, marital roles, and women's status of today. Most respondents stress the centrality of men-women relationships in the text: "the story is about the alienation and triteness of human relationships, particularly between the two sexes" (FS6; FS refers to Female Student data and MS refers to Male Student data of the survey), "about women's expectations of men" (FS3), "it's a mockery of the traditional men-women relationships" (FS4). Therefore, indications of belonging to a particular sex appear to be more significant in the process of interpretation than other variables such as age, profession, national identification and social class.

The most recurrent gender stereotypes in the study evolve around the definitions of "male"/"female" nature, "masculine"/ "feminine" behaviour, as well as gendered ways of thinking and writing. The categorical stance of Liksom's female protagonist ("and I had thought I'd gotten myself a real man") and "I need a real man who takes care of things, helps pay off the mortgage, puts stuff in the refrigerator") provokes the readers to come up with their own definition of "a proper man/woman." Here arises the question of gender authenticity: what counts as a man or a woman? Is it something in one's behaviour or physical appearance such as the softness of the skin, the manner of dressing, the degree of submissiveness and tenderness, or is it rather what Judith Butler has called the "performativity of gender" i.e., "the reiterative and citational practices

constructing sex/gender" (234). The respondents tend to recognize as feminine/masculine only what they have been taught to recognize as such, i.e., the respective reiterated stereotypical features of passivity/activity, irrationality/logos, emotion/reason, weakness/aggression etc. In their interpretations of the story a whole black list of female virtues emerges such as: "lacking moral feelings and sympathy," "vicious inclination to violence," "indecent mode of life," "immorality," "proclivity for drinking," "recklessness," "stupidity," and "sexual predation."

The readers' interpretative difficulty is due to a great extent to the reversed gender roles of the two characters: the man is seduced by the woman and not vice versa; he is inactive, lazy, the consumer, staying at home, while she is the "head of the family," the breadwinner, the producer, going to work and making all the decisions; she not only picks up the guy but she murders him instead of committing suicide (as most women would have done in traditional terms). In addition, he is sensitive and sentimental while she is callous, insensitive, and cool thus cheating the readers' expectations in terms of the established norms of feminine "performance." Liksom's story is an illustration of how more complicated texts provide more complicated understanding of difference. Her crafting of the short story seems naive, but it can also be seen as a conscious parody of the stereotypical sex/gender presuppositions of our times. What looks like inconsistencies in her gender politics (for example, the fact that the male character proposes and the female one accepts, the wedding ceremony and the conventional white dress of the bride, as well as the fact that the major protagonist refers to traditional values and standards to justify her untraditional killing) are not accidental occurrences to me. I would rather treat them as reflecting the complicated gendered situation of women nowadays, caught between their inner craving for independence and the demands society places upon the individual woman, demands that sometimes contradict a woman's own mental representations of the self.

The Bulgarian female respondents' ambivalent stance with regard to the gender conflict in the story proves that point. The female respondents (especially the students) seem to be the most critical and harsh on the rebellious female model in the story. They do not simply judge her as a person in gender-neutral terms but basically as a negative sign of womanhood, referring to her as: "an idiot" (FS1), "a vulgar woman" (FS7, FS8, FS9), "a reckless and simple-minded woman" (FS14, FS15), passing moral judgements on her on the grounds of "her phoney, misunderstood emancipation and too much self-esteem" (FA1) or "her desire to dominate" (FS5), and even her guilt "as part of a degraded society of effeminate men and emancipated women" (FA9). Surprisingly, the reversed gender contract in the story has no liberatory or comic effect for the Bulgarian female readers in terms of transcending the ascribed gender roles of wife, mother and sex object (contrary to the observations of some of the young male readers). Perhaps the strong negative reaction to the female protagonist is due to the particular fact that she is a murderer, but it could also be attributed to the more general gender-blindness among Bulgarian women who are still very much under the spell of the laws of patriarchal ideology. In several responses, however, there is an interesting discrepancy between the attitudes of the female respondents about femininity as revealed in the fictional text and in their own life-stories. For example, in the descriptions of "a typical week/work day" in the background section of Questionnaire 2, several women confess feelings of anger at the unequal gender distribution of duties in the family, the overall injustice to women or the lack of time to read books and do things they enjoy. Yet, at the same time, they do not hesitate to discard the story's main character as a bad model of "womanhood."

There is yet another discrepancy here -- when speaking about their own life stories, the female readers respond on an individual basis (seeing themselves as particular individuals), but when discussing the major protagonist, they tend to generalise, trying to establish an order of group cohesiveness (i.e., approaching her as a representative of the female sex). Obviously, the respondents oscillate between the particular (in terms of their specific situation, personal relationships and experiences) and the general (mythical narratives and established norms). Gradually in the process of analysis "she" and "he" disappear as characters and the abstract figures they represent of a " strong woman" or a "weak man" take over. The effacement of difference is predicated on the creation of the culturally-predetermined types of "the strong/active

woman" versus "the weak/passive man" that are superimposed upon each other. Thus (the particular) difference is pushed aside/outside, to be invoked between or among types, rather than within them. Could this be an expression of the tension between the particular and the (mythically) general in the content of the stereotype itself? Or could it be part of the very generalization process we use as researchers? Sometimes we do not only analyse generalities and stereotypes but are also tied up with pre-conceived schemes, so that we reproduce them in our descriptions and theories. As we know there is no research without generalization or at least without establishing links between different levels of particularity and generality but how to do this without losing the particular? Commenting on the future of cultural studies, John Fiske speaks of a similar tension between cultural studies as a discipline and "the culture of everyday life" which he finds productive: "...specificities may have to be subjected to generalizations for their significances to be understood and communicated, however incompletely: but equally, practice should be allowed to expose the incompleteness of theory, to reveal the limits of its adequacy, and specificity should be able to assert the value of that which generalization overlooks or excludes" (Fiske 165). In this vein of thought the current cross-cultural project has yielded important empirical results for cultural studies because it has generated meaningful tension between the particular and the general, the real and the fictional, the personal and the collective, the practical and the theoretical. By fuelling the readers' passion for vicariousness, Liksom's story mediates the real in fictional terms and thus has triggered more sincere, uninhibited and complicated reactions around serious social issues.

What is the role of textual stereotypes in providing access to both the real and the imagined social and cultural structures? As Gilman suggests, patterns of stereotypical associations are usually based on "a combination of both real-life experience and the world of myth, the two intertwined neither entirely of this world nor of the realm of the myth" (21). These categories are not mutually exclusive, often they contradict and supplement one another. If lived experience and myth flow into each other in different dosages, then the tendency not to generalize and the penchant of using stereotypes might be reconsidered as a difference whose elements are also tied up together. Or perhaps this might be explained through the ambiguous nature of stereotypes: they are mental representations but they do not remain abstractions (we find in them traces of everyday life specificity) and second, they are rigid and simplistic, yet permeable entities, subject to change (under the influence of the lived experience itself subject to change). The protean nature of stereotypes becomes particularly visible in times of radical change. For example, the Bulgarian women respondents have been suspended between two conflicting stereotypes -- "the iron superwoman" and "the submissive woman" -- due to the conflicting post-communist gender myths and realities. Having been socialized in the patriarchal (pre-modern) gender divisions as well as the socialist pseudo-emancipation legacy until 1989, we are now witnessing the postmodern turns in family structures, sexual norms and gender roles with confusion caught between old and new paradigms, between changing standards of "femininity" and "masculinity," resistant to any false promises for "emancipation," including feminist ideas and practices coming from the West. The result is a forked consciousness/response, where the doubling subjectivity of the woman reader produces a doubly estranged appropriation. The feminist theorist Patrocinio Schweickart explains similar bifurcated female responses in reading practices in the following way: "The woman reader reads the text as both a man and a woman. But in either case the result is the same: she confirms her position as other" (Schweickart 33). Liksom's short story is confusing for the Bulgarian female readers because it represents a new gender dynamics: the woman reader is first tempted to identify with the strong and self-sufficient protagonist of her sex, but then has to withdraw because of her violent, cool and aggressive nature (close to a stereotypical male). Thus she comes to reject her femininity as "Other" again.

What is at stake here goes well beyond the issue of the androcentricity of acquired literary taste and conventions. The bifurcated female responses to the text, in fact, say much about the extratextual practices in a transitional post-communist society: they document a clash between Liksom's ironic representation of the dominant gender roles and the iconic representation of women in Bulgarian culture for centuries on end. Here I am using the word "iconic" in its double

sense as the traditional representation of Woman as a picture of a sacred Christian personage (a phantom as a virgin-mother, saint, martyr, going back to the use and veneration of icons in Eastern Orthodox Church until the 8th and 9th centuries AD), as well as the additional Sovietised communist icon of the "new working superwoman," superimposed on the latter (of course, having first erased the religious layer) where the empty Woman-icon of false emancipation stood like a memorial statue-symbol of the restless worker, tough, totally degendered, sacrificial to the needs of the party, society and family.

The textual interpretations reveal the subtext of various myths underlying the fantasy life of Bulgarian women. Why do the Bulgarian female readers tend to show much more sympathy for the male character (deviating from the traditional understanding of a "proper man") than the male readers for the female protagonist's deviations from the traditional norms of "femininity"? For example, many female respondents admit their feelings of pity and sympathy for the male character, bringing in the pre-history of his unhappy childhood in order to explain psychologically his inadequate behaviour. The new endings they provide also illustrate this concern by trying to save "him" while punishing "her" severely. Here are a few examples of suggested alternative endings: "She is killed in a similar way by an ex-lover of hers" (FS5), "She goes to prison, while he stays alive and lives happily ever after" (FS10, FS11), "She commits suicide" (FA1), "She is put on trial and sentenced to death" (FA8). Is the sympathy for the male protagonist due only to the fact that he happens to be the victim in the story (bringing about the common identification of women with victims and weaker characters) or is it rather due to the fact that his utopian helplessness speaks of their own helplessness as women in a male-dominated society? Perhaps both, since they are interrelated anyway. The empirical data of my survey show that the identification patterns of the respondents are strongly influenced by their sex/gender presuppositions and expectations. Yet their preference, siding or identification patterns with the male/female character are not highly predictable and homogeneous in terms of symmetrical or asymmetrical gender-biased responses. For example, clear cut-patterns of vindication or liking for the opposite sex/gender are seldom observed. Most female respondents (especially the students) feel sympathy for the man in the story, while the male respondents (especially the students) are all very annoyed by the male character. Obviously, the category of gender is intricately interwoven with the category of age.

The group of the young male readers gave the most flexible and varied interpretation of gender issues. Unlike the Finnish male students, who express negative attitude to the female protagonist and put the blame on feminism (Koskimaa, 153), the Bulgarian male students show sympathy and admiration for the female character, even to the extent of taking her side in the conflict: "She is the stronger person in the relationship and I admire her for that" (MS3), "I like her openness, arrogance and strong will" (MS6), "She is funny, cool; doesn't care a fig about anything" (MS9), "She is strong, insists on her job and makes her own living" (MS11), or "I feel pity for her, for all she couldn't get from life" (MS13, MS15). These examples illustrate that the young readers' identification patterns with the figure of the "hero," in Hans Robert Jauss's terminology, oscillate between "associative modality of identification" (i.e., placing oneself into the roles of the other participants) and "sympathetic identification" (where compassion is the basic receptive disposition) despite the fact that they belong to the opposite sex, or perhaps because of it?

At the same time the young male readers are extremely critical and/or ironic of the male anti-hero: "I feel sympathy for her and disgust for him" (MS12), "I feel indifference for the man, he is too apathetic, languid and inefficient" (MS3), "The man's behaviour made me feel ashamed of my sex" (MS1). Through their downright rejection of the male character the male students assert their own "manhood" based on the stereotypical understanding of masculinity as a performance of activity, efficiency and toughness. This is most obvious in the following ironic interpretation: "To my mind the story tells us of the short marital life of a woman (or perhaps a man?) with a man" (MS2), where the reversed gender roles turn out to be sufficient evidence to categorise the female protagonist as a representative of the other (stronger) sex. This comment implies both uneasiness about the failed masculinity represented in the story as well as certain pleasure in decoding the sex/gender ambiguity. There is even a touch of homophobic feeling when we trace other comments by the same respondent, especially in view of the suggested new ending where "the

two characters die of AIDS." Still it is difficult to figure out the motives behind this attitude -- is it really homophobia, is it a kind of ultimate punishment for both characters for deviating from the gender roles or is it sheer playfulness deriving from toying with clichés? I would rather relate this ambiguity to the general ambiance within the male students' group, caught between the traditional models of masculinity/femininity and their desire for novelty and surprise. The latter feature is easily discernible also in the funny unconventional endings they have provided, in their general liking of the story and its obscene language.

As observed by all the research teams involved in the project, the language of the story is seen as a serious stumbling block for the appropriation of the text. The study has revealed that language intersects with gender in many intricate ways. Language is not simply the building block of literature and through it of the structures of the world surrounding us, but also one of the most powerful systems of signification and representation of those structures, creating and perpetuating mental images as metaphors, symbols and stereotypes, thus revealing the tension between the "reality" of the reader and the textual reality. In what way are language and writing gender-marked? As a whole, most Bulgarian readers (42 out of 60) found the language of the story "shocking," "vulgar," "cynical," and "repugnant." The female responses from both age groups seem to be quite homogeneous in their negativity and denial of the obscene language. Male reactions are much more mixed, moving from negativity, neutrality and indifference to sheer appreciation. Three male adults approve of the language for pragmatic reasons: "...it is direct, it suits the atmosphere of the story, it is true to life." Unlike them, the younger male respondents seem to derive real pleasure from the language: "The story is insipid but the language is great, super, real killer" (MS2), "I like slang, it makes me laugh" (MS10), "The language is vivid" (MS12), "This is everyday language, I like slang" (MS3). The positive attitude of the young male readers could be explained again by their openness to novelty and experimentation (seen also in their preference for authors such as Stephen King, Arthur Hailey and Edgar Wallace), by their interpretation of slang, swear words, expressive and vivid language as subversive to traditions and canons and, finally, by the opportunity to assert their own masculinity through it.

In contrast to them, female students (with one single exception) are all put off by the style of the story and particularly by the language of the female protagonist. The connection to gender socialization is easy to make. One female student indirectly offers a definition of gendered writing: "She dominates the story with her viewpoint, what she does... this is a female story written in a male way... she wants to be in the centre of everything" (FS5). Obviously the categories "female" and "feminine" are jumbled and confused here, which is not accidental in view of the fact that gender as a discursive category is still non-existent in Bulgaria (and Eastern Europe as a whole), or more precisely it exists only in/as translation of Western texts and experiences. Hence, the resurfacing rigid stereotypical paradigms of "male" and/or "female" writing in the interpretations of the text. The story is labelled "female" because there is a woman and a woman's point of view at its centre. At the same time it is written in a "male way" because she (the woman-writer-protagonist) "wants to dominate everything (both life within the story and the narrative itself)." If we add to these features the style of the story -- compressed, flat, devoid of emotions but full of action, violence and foul language -- we would arrive not simply at an impossibility of defining "women's writing" as, for example, defined by French feminist theory but precluding its existence even. This prescriptive and reductive formula reveals in a nutshell the double bind of being a woman-writer in a predominantly male literary tradition, as well as the stereotypical presuppositions concerning the place of women in a still predominantly patriarchal society.

The above-mentioned features of "feminine" writing have come to the surface in connection with the respondents' attempts to guess the sex of the author. The rules of the sex/gender-guessing game are totally controversial and sporadic. The greater part of the readers (40 out of 60) correctly identify the author as a woman although there is no logic behind their contradictory literary and cultural assumptions: "The author is a woman because she approves of the female protagonist's action" (FA3), "Only a woman-author can be so cruel" (FA9) or "Only a man-author who hates women can write such a story" (FA5). Obviously the criteria for defining gendered writing are quite confused and confusing, which speaks of certain tendencies of blurring the

distinctions between the genders, the sexes, the generations and the respective modes of living and representation in a time of flux and change. We cannot help noticing another double-bind in the suggested interpretations: by correctly identifying the sex of the author while at the same time insisting on the old divisions of female/male writing, the respondents unconsciously acknowledge the changing realities both in and beyond the text. Thus, the safe distance provided by the use of fictional material contributes to a more open and critical reaction to the imaginary lines drawn by the stereotype, hence a more comprehensive approach to the study of accepted patterns of gender representation, their evolution, and effect. The tricky way that the gender stereotypes operate in/beyond the text, as protean and changing rather than strict and rigid, reveals the changing "subtext" of the readers' inner world of mental representations in the transitional Bulgarian society and culture.

National and Supranational Stereotypes

Reading fiction in translation brings to the surface the tension between the two respective cultures (source and target cultures), which, in its turn, brings national and cultural stereotypes to the foreground. The Bulgarian respondents seem to have difficulty in locating the story not so much geographically (some make the pertinent remark that the setting is a cold Nordic country) but culturally and ideologically. When asked "Can you see any nation-specific elements in the story?" most respondents answer negatively. Still a large number categorically identify the location as a "non-Bulgarian setting" (MS3), "definitely not Bulgaria" (FA1), even "non-East European," "non-Central European" (MS5), "from another country" (MA14). This negative identification shows at least two basic dilemmas in the interpretation processes concerning the problem of nationality.

The first thing to notice is the readers' uneasiness to connect the story with their native societal and cultural environment, which itself expresses some uncertainty as to where they stand as members of a national community in changing Europe. From the respondents' comments it is evident that Bulgarian culture is still trying to identify through structures of the Other Europe as a whole, the Balkans, the ex-Soviet bloc. When one can no longer find an identity in a national (useful) past, in the well-drawn parameters of class, religion, profession, and generation or in a feasible future, what is left to identify with? The consistent efforts of the respondents to come up with some vague definition of "Bulgarianness," to find a centre of belonging not inside the country but outside (that does not exist even), suggest that in this transitional context the questions of history and legitimacy have not disappeared, on the contrary they have gained a new importance. Despite the obvious postmodern obsession with disappearance, dissolution and dispossession in the last twelve years of painful negations, a deep need for a sense of belonging, for clear concepts and affiliations is easily felt (often articulated and reinforced through the use of the stereotypical East/West images).

The second dilemma goes one step further and can be metaphorically rephrased in the question "How west to go?" Obviously the old ideological opposition between the supranational blocs of the East and the West is still operative over ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. One student approaches the story in the following way: "It's about the relationships in a family from a very Western country" (FS3) as if there were various degrees of "westernness" in cultural terms. Another respondent stresses "the lack of culture and sophistication in a western society" (FA3). The use of the umbrella term "western" as a common denominator for "otherness" is ambiguous. It does not imply an impossibility to tell apart various western cultures but rather the irrelevance of such a differentiation in the global postmodern situation. As Stuart Hall observes, the latter is a global formation working on the terrain of postmodern culture with two basic characteristics: "it remains centred in the West and it always speaks English; it is a homogenizing form of cultural representation, enormously absorptive of things which it wants to recognize, and it absorbs those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world" (Hall 1991, 28). Therefore it is not surprising that most Bulgarian respondents "read" contemporary Western influence as American.

Although Bulgaria is geographically situated in Europe, globalization is more often associated with forms of Americanization than with the European "family of culture." As many as 16 readers "discover" various American features in their interpretations of the (Finnish) story: "The author is

American" (MS15, MA12, FS3); "It's written in an American style of writing: a combination of slang plus dynamism plus aggressiveness which is the opposite of the European circumstantial style, full of detail" (FA9); "It reminds me of American action movies full of violence and suspense" (FA3); or even of specific American films such as Antonioni's "Blow-Up" (FA1) and "Zandalee" (FS3) or simply of a "specific American style of writing" associated with authors such as Charles Bukowsky and Henry Miller (FS5). Unlike the Finnish and Estonian readers, who associated the story with the familiar native locations and/or of neighbouring countries and cultures (such as Russia and Russified parts of Estonia, as discussed by Malle Järve and Raine Koskimaa), one third of the Bulgarian respondents situate the story in far-away America. Is this accidental? It could be seen as an expression of the safe strategy of displacing the "Other" as far away as possible but I would rather see it as the direct result of the current intensive Americanization of Bulgarian popular culture, marked by processes of rapid Coca-cola-zation, Marlboro-lization, Walt-Disney-zation and so on.

The study shows that in the current Bulgarian scene, America has been reduced to a huge *trompe-l'oeil*, a picture/image, offering at a distance the utopia of a better reality. In his book *America* (1988), Jean Baudrillard studies America as the best possible illustration of the "seduction as destiny" strategy. Liksom's fiction, however, works in the opposite direction: it recognizes the impossibility of achieving utopia by encouraging illusion-breaking strategies rather than illusion-making ones. With its obscene language and abject details the text assaults the senses of the readers and produces the effect of what Hal Foster (1996, 122) calls the "return of the real." Foster explains contemporary fascination with violence and trauma, saturating Western popular culture, the media and avant-garde art, as a reaction to the need for authenticity. He claims that the "dissatisfaction with the textual model of reality" and the disillusionment with a "performative postmodernism" celebrating desire, but "compromised by consumerism," brings back the "real" as "traumatic" (166). Thus in the Western culture of spectacle, death and violence are sought out for their ability to accentuate the sense of the real.

Liksom's avant-garde fiction also relies on such privileged signifiers of the real (urban decay, dirt, crime, sexual excess, lifestyle of drifting and drinking, foul language) to fulfil the readers' desire for authenticity, for something that cannot be simulated, disguised or reproduced as image and that simply feels true. Yet the open ending of the story subverts the sense of reality: the protagonist gets away with the murder, she celebrates her "courageous" act with her friends, and life goes on as if nothing had happened. Thus the story first creates a strong sense of reality and then suspends it, which further confuses the readers, especially readers who are not quite familiar with the reality of the Western world. This confusion is visible in the controversial reactions of the Bulgarian readers, trying simultaneously to draw the line between real and unreal, between utopian and dystopian images of the West. Despite the omnipresent Western lure many respondents describe the situation in the story as "familiar" mainly in terms of the crisis of the Western mode of living, associated with unemployment, social insecurity, alienation and cynicism, while ignoring the fact that nowadays these features are very much part of our reality too. The second paradox is related to the fact that their "knowledge" about Western reality is not so much the result of first-hand experience, but is mediated to a great extent by the Western media or popular culture products (especially the increasingly image-dominated culture of Hollywood film, TV and video, as documented in the project).

The controversial interpretations of the text reveal some extratextual tensions around the functioning of the real in different socio-economic contexts and literary traditions, more precisely the changing perceptions of Western reality in post-communist Eastern Europe. The recent coming of global consumer culture in Bulgaria has made even more obvious the clash between the overproduction of hyperreality in Western postmodern culture and the insufficiency of reality (in material terms) in Eastern Europe. For example, in the West reality is so immaterial that one cannot recover the real described by Baudrillard (1994, 6) as the fourth stage in the relationship between the real and the simulacrum "where the image has no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum." Or, as he claims somewhere else, America has reached its "vanishing point," signalling the death of meaning, the death of reality, the death of the social, of the political

(Baudrillard 1988, 1-11). In Bulgaria reality is still so tangible that one cannot possibly escape the real. Until the collapse of communism Eastern Europe could be seen as going through the second order of simulacrum where "the image masks and denatures a profound reality" under the regime of communist propaganda. It is only since recently that Eastern Europe is experiencing some elements of the third order where the simulacrum becomes reality itself. Owing to this drastic divergence in experiencing the real East/West, many Bulgarian respondents have failed to appreciate Liksom's irony and anti-utopian critique of Western reality.

The issue of interpreting the real in/through fiction is also intricately intertwined with the issue of literary method and competence. For more than forty years socialist realism was the canonical must for the production of literature in the ex-Soviet bloc countries insisting on a more schematic, mimetic and utopian representation of life in literature as well as prescribing thematic and aesthetic dogmas. Liksom's story offers a very provocative representation of reality by discarding the notion of the positive "working-class hero" and an optimistic ending. The use of foul language has been listed as particularly disturbing and disruptive. Is it a kind of a displacement strategy where readers do not like the message but blame the foul language? Or does this have to do with the inherent definition of any linguistic group in normative language, especially in view of the fact that the communist discourse of glorification and censorship, of toning down (even cutting out as unhealthy) sexuality issues, had excluded for decades obscene words from the official communication? Thus the adult readers who have internalised the generic and formulaic requirements of socialist realism, are baffled and do not know what to make of Liksom's "shock of the normal" unlike the younger generation of readers (who have internalised the socialist dogmas to a lesser extent), who enjoy any form of transgression, literary included. In fact, similar divergences in generational responses have been observed in terms of literary production itself after the fall of the communist regime in Eastern Europe. As Lutzkanova-Vassileva shows, nowadays the new generation of writers in the region take special pleasure in stressing the historical, linguistic and psychological collapse after 1989; they playfully "disclose the absurdity of the socialist realist practice and dismantle all sorts of communist cliches" in an attempt "to redeem the traumatic post-totalitarian reality" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss1/5/>. Here emerges yet another possible way of describing the current postmodern/post-communist situation as post-traumatic -- i.e., articulating the unspeakable past through the delayed effect of trauma.

Another factor that can explain the controversial interpretations of reality as represented in Liksom's story, is the fact that the stereotype of the West has been implanted in Eastern European consciousness as both a threat (the bad Other) and a promise (the good Other). With the lifting of the Iron Curtain the mental image of the "West" took on a more positive turn, although not necessarily an idealistic one. Many people in Eastern Europe joke that the "Iron Curtain" has been transformed into an "Ironic Veil," i.e., that the solid wall of steel has been theatrically replaced by a more transparent barrier, but we still live "behind the veil," i.e., the West is still unapproachable because of its inherently superior stance and because of its unattainability (now measured in material rather than ideological terms). Here we observe what Gilman (18) calls the "palimpsest" structure of the stereotype, "where initial bipolar representations are still legible." In the current context of transition in Eastern Europe the stereotype of the West functions as such a palimpsest: the layers of communist ideological scripts (sustained for almost 50 years) have not been totally erased, they are still "legible" under the new post-totalitarian discourses, superimposed on them. Due to these conflicting historical and political legacies, the respondents' attitude stands midway between glorification of the West and condemnation of it, projecting both images of fear and admiration. Although Liksom's story contains no mention of the opposition East/West, the study testifies to the power of text as a source of tension, bringing to the surface various forms of national and ideological imaginaries as well as the possibilities to resurrect or unmask them.

The divergences between cultural practices in the East/West of Europe can be illustrated through yet another textual aspect of the study. The comparative statistics gathered during the project suggest that among the cultures compared, the Bulgarians are "the most active fiction readers," showing "the strongest preference for foreign authors over native authors," although the percentage is relatively high among all the readers from the project (Koskimaa 25). The figures

speak for themselves: 86% of the Bulgarian students and 84% of the adults prefer reading foreign authors of various nationalities, but somehow mostly Western writers such as Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, P.G. Wodehouse, Alberto Moravia, Umberto Eco, Henri de Maupassant, Erich Maria Remarque, O'Henry, Isaac Asimov, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Raymond Chandler, J.D. Salinger, William Saroyan, Arthur Hailey, Betty Mahmoody, Ray Bradbury, Joyce Carol Oates, James Hadley Chase, Judith Krantz, Stephen King, and Danielle Steele, to mention the most prominent on the list. What does this passion for fiction by Western writers imply? On the one hand, the respondents dislike Liksom's anti-utopian message, while on the other hand, it mobilizes their desire to break earlier ideological constraints and taboos and come closer to the (fictional) utopia of the "West." Thus Rosa Liksom's literary text dramatizes in its Bulgarian readers stereotypical images of the West (both positive and negative) that are not even present in the very text, but that help the latter rationalize their view of the world. The tension between the utopian and anti-utopian mental representations of the West testifies to the power of textual practices to build imaginary constructs and then deconstruct them. As already mentioned, this tension is very much the product of communist and Cold-War essentialist discourses derived from the oppositions between ideologies, good and bad, native and foreign, that can be identified with what Edward Said (93) has termed "textual attitudes," i.e., the inherent impulse to read texts "innocently," out of context, by simply "applying what one learns out of a book literally to reality." In this respect there is no doubt that Liksom's text is thought-provoking for any reader, because it is a good exercise in undoing and unlearning "textual attitudes."

Conclusion

The reception of Liksom's short story, a fictional event involving particular characters and a particular situation occurring at a particular time in a particular context, has functioned as a litmus test for the functioning of overarching cultural, ideological and national codes, as well as for the very change in these codes, norms and prescriptions at moments of social and cultural transition. The study has proved the need to study texts in context, in connection to the parameters of age, gender, profession, nation and ideologically defined groups (including the supranational blocks East/West). It has also indicated that texts are products of specific cultural practices and that texts and representations have their own level of operation being not simply a facsimile of everyday reality but a mechanism that further shapes social relations. The differences in the respondents' interpretations show that major categories of analysis such as gender, age, profession, or nationality cannot be thought in the abstract. They function differently under different social and cultural circumstances as part of the "local semiosis." For example, the cross-cultural comparison has revealed certain common tendencies in the six cultures under investigation, more precisely that categories for thought have been reshaped and large value systems discredited in the postmodern world of flux and instability. Yet despite the general sense of dystopia, the falling away from past ideals and identity crisis, people still long for the utopian, for the "impossibly ideal." There is a genuine felt need for a framework of values and concepts through which each individual or group can make sense of the world. The study has also brought to the surface some processes of divergence in the temporal and spatial framework of Europe. In the West the binary divisions which organize social perception (between generations, sexes, regions, religions, social strata) seem to be getting blurred, while in post-communist Eastern Europe the opposite tendency is gaining momentum and new divisions are just being built around gender, class, generational, and ideological gradients of power.

Additionally, the empirical data gathered on reading habits and media use in the respective European countries show that book culture is still a vital and significant component of the electronic age. The project has proved the effectiveness of text and textual analysis for cultural studies because of their ability to engage audiences in both real and imagined activities, to create a sense of familiarity conducive to immediate audience appropriation. In this respect, the role of literary conventions, language and stereotypes has become more prominent. Unlike film and TV culture, which rely on the visual and more flexible codes of representation, literature as a much older medium that relies to a great extent on established conventions, genres and traditions can

be a good measuring rod for the study of degrees of proclivity or resistance to cultural change. In this respect, the structure of the stereotype has turned out to be an efficient means of exploring difference by providing a framework and vocabulary in which to clothe the readers' personal and national anxieties and fantasies, as well as a means of dealing with shifting historical patterns and the changeable modes of thinking about the self and other. The respondents' heated discussions about the language of Liksom's story also come to suggest that the cultural and the social can be addressed/read through text. The power of language to mobilize discussion around bigger issues in/beyond the text (particularly the role of canon formation, socialist realism, representation of the real, of the literary and so on) comes in support of the claims made by semiotics and poststructuralist theory, which stress the fundamentally discursive nature of the social world, always constructed and mediated by language.

And finally, it can be argued that the interdisciplinary approach (integrating textual and cultural analysis) can yield rewarding results because it takes into consideration not only textual structures but also social and political processes, as well as the role of the institutions of cultural production (such as schools, media, the literary canon, and so on). In Hall's view one of the problems with instituting a genuine cultural and political practice is that academic intellectuals tend to see their political interventions as "exclusively matters of textuality and language " (Hall 1992, 286). Therefore he insists that cultural studies live "with the tension that all textual practices must assume i.e. the study of the text in its affiliations with institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, ideologically defined parties and professions, nations, races and genders" (Hall 1992, 284). Although based on a fictional text, the present study reminds us again that cultural studies is more than a theoretical intervention. It is a political project in at least two senses: firstly in the way politics informs any theoretical position, as well as the literary, aesthetic, and media representations; and secondly in terms of the active engagement of intellectuals in a project for social change. It has also demonstrated that theory does not travel universally, that it also has its local inflections, most obviously in the suspicions coming from post-communist countries concerning the legacy of Marxism or the future of feminism, but also in the disrupting effect that Eastern Europe produces on Eurocentrism (being the periphery, the "back yard of Europe," and yet part of it), or on postmodernism (as a cultural dominant in global terms). Thus the cross-cultural perspective in this project implies the need of empirical proof for theory and of investigation of the limitations and omissions of theory, as well as the possibilities of bridging theory and practice, the textual and the social, the local and the global in the rapidly changing cultural dynamics on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

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