The Absent Presence: Eastern Europe in Britain

CORINA ANGHEL CRIȘU

Résumé: *Insistant sur la signification de la fluidité des frontières, de l'échange inter-culturel, de la dynamique entre la présence et l'absence, cet ouvrage se propose de discuter la nature toujours changeante de l'identité transnationale, particulièrement le mode dans lequel celle-ci peut être (dé)construite en relation avec les différents espaces culturels. Les sections de cet ouvrage discutent le roman de Rose Tremain* The Road Home *(le gagneur du prestigieux Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction, 2008), offrant de nouvelles perspectives sur l'Europe de l'Est et de l'Ouest – deux sphères qui, malgré les différences entre elles, ne se situent plus sur des positions antagoniques. Tandis que la Grande Bretagne est présentée comme un centre multiculturel, l'Est de l'Europe n'apparaît plus comme un espace monolithique, mais comme une présence toujours changeante, acceptant la diversité, en affirmant simultanément sa propre spécificité.*

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1. Eastern Europe as *Terra Incognita*

In recent British fiction, a significant number of novels are focused on British characters travelling to Eastern Europe, whereas very few of them are concerned with Eastern Europeans coming to Britain. The world outside the West, the *absent presence* – the unknown, marginalised, and quite threatening *terra incognita* of Eastern Europe – is often reconsidered through a British lens, while the U.K. is rarely rediscovered by Eastern Europeans.

Filling a gap in the contemporary literary landscape, Rose Tremain's much acclaimed *The Road Home* places the life story of an Eastern European male character in a transnational context. As the author affirms in an interview, the novel "aims to chart the journey of one (broken-hearted) man from Eastern Europe through our society, and to explore what he makes of us and what we make of him – in such a way that, by the end, he is fully human and knowable to us and we are more knowable to ourselves."[1] By telling the story of Lev, an immigrant coming from an unspecified Eastern European country (that has just entered the EU), Tremain makes it her duty to remind us what happens when *Us* and *Them* intermingle, opening up new possibilities for interpreting the Eastern European self and for "translating" it to a Western audience.

It is this complicated relationship between the immigrant's identity and the old/new place that represents the main interest of this paper. How is the *absent presence* of Eastern Europe

redefined by a British writer? How does she give life to an Eastern European character – a *homo duplex* who thinks through comparisons and filters the present by rethinking the past? Drawing on critical and philosophical writing on displacement and migration, the subsequent sections analyse Tremain's reconsideration of transnational identity, arguing that being in transit, crossing borders, regrowing roots, and transplanting them are essential stages in the endless process of bridging East and West.

2. Being in Transit

In a comprehensive article about Tremain's fiction, Sarah Sceats identifies three important factors that continue to resonate throughout the writer's work: 1. "the focus on a marginal or outsider figure"; 2. "the possibility of obsession, of being driven by desire or appetite, whether for food, sex, a person, a landscape, a thing" and 3. "the feeling of belonging, the desire to locate oneself in relation to whatever it is that confers a fulfilling self-identity, that allows the feeling of being 'right in one's skin'" (167). These three factors can also be found in *The Road Home* – a novel about an immigrant's quest from a state of marginality and dependence to self-assertion and independence.

The epigraph of the book – "How can we live, without our lives?" – taken from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, that great work about economic migration, sets the realistic tone of the novel, as well as its thematic patterns dealing with loss and deprivation, poverty and hardship. Moreover, the manifold meanings reverberating in the title point to the fact that Lev's migration follows a circular route, that his existential movement has a teleological sense, being directed – as in the *Odyssey* – towards returning home.

Steeped in metaphors of journeying, Lev's story of self-improvement takes the form of a *Bildungsroman*, conveying a profound educational message, not devoid of ethical implications. An atypical character, Lev is not a simple immigrant looking for work, but a *homo viator* in search for human values. Possessing a rich imagination, Lev learns how an idea can be stirred into being, how the experience accumulated abroad can be tested in his country in order to make a life-long dream come true.

Crucially, Tremain chooses to write about a character passing through a crisis, describing one of those "moments of fracture, […] of syncope, […] of sufferance," moments that are "the real epiphanies of our destiny, defining our hidden structure" (Plesu 112). At the beginning of the novel, Lev's voyage towards London on the Trans-Euro bus is mainly a self-centred experience, a way of (re)membering the shattered parts of his life. His whole existence seems suspended in time, his whole being in transit, oscillating between a retrospective state of mind preoccupied with the past and a prospective state envisaging the future. This perpetual alternation of temporal levels can be detected in the narrative texture of the novel, whose chronological design is interrupted by flash-backs, by recurrent images of the past.

At age forty-two, Lev mourns the death of his wife, Marina, who has died of leukaemia. His conscience is ridden with guilt at the thought of still being alive after Marina's death, which "was with him always, like a shadow on the X-ray of his spirit" (6). Even the lively presence of his five-year-old daughter, the loving care of his mother, or the cheerfulness of his best friend

cannot make him stop his grieving, his surrender to inactivity, and his longing for rest and oblivion. His existential inertia is also generated by the fact that he is unemployed since the Baryn sawmill closed and financially dependent on his mother, living "off the money [she] made selling jewellery manufactured from tin" (4).

Lev's aimless *taedium vitae* and his mental postponing of any possibility to act come to an abrupt end when he has to pass through an unexpected event. The role of the helper is played here by his friend, Rudi, a vigorous, spirited man, who decides to take Lev on a trip to the Kalinin Mountains, in order "to embrace something" (112). The steady ascent following no path, the wilderness of the place situated away from human habitation, and the ethereal atmosphere make "Lev become aware of a feeling of poise within himself that he hadn't known for a long time" (112). His climbing a rusty ladder on the point of breaking at any time and his direct confrontation with death can be seen as epiphanic moments that trigger inner change and renewal. The revelation of his own possible death activates in him the desire to move on with his life, to put an end to this dangerous apathy.

In this light, Lev's decision to learn English and emigrate to the U.K. provides a life-saving solution designed to solve both his personal and familial problems:

> He was sure his 'self' needed improving, too. For a long time now, he'd been moody, melancholy and short-tempered. Even with Maya. For days on end, he'd sat on Ina's porch without moving, or lain in an old gray hammock, smoking and staring at the sky […]. But at last he'd been able to tell his mother he was going to make amends. By learning English and then by migrating to England, he was going to save them. Two years from now, he would be a man-of-the-world. He would own an expensive watch. He would put Ina and Maya aboard a tourist boat and show them the famous buildings. They would have no need of a tourist guide because he, Lev, would know the names of everything in London by heart. (25)

In Lev's view, the relationship between self-improvement and emigrating to a Western country is vital. In his imaginary travel, he pictures a prosperous future, ignoring the stages of his future travail and visualising only the end of the road – the financial prosperity. As he assumes the role of a "tourist guide" showing his family around London, he does not take into account the other more difficult roles he might have to play as a homeless person or a menial worker.

3. Acknowledging the Other's Presence: London – an Interactive Space

The spatial trope remains central in Tremain's novel. Both the Eastern European and the British geographies are (re)shaped by the immigrant's point of view and reconsidered in a new light, so that the strange is rendered familiar and the familiar strange. The East/West polarisation of space presupposes several dichotomies: present vs. absent, marginal vs. central, rural vs. urban, traditional vs. modern, and communist vs. capitalist. At the temporal level, it also entails a polarisation of time: past vs. present.

However, the East/West polarisation becomes relative and the novel reveals the Westernness of Eastern Europe, inasmuch as the Easternness of Britain. *The Road Home* can therefore be analysed as a "multiple frontier quest, where the borders between the East and the West become porous in a never-ending, cross-cultural exchange" (Crisu 2009, 25). If Western models are implemented in the East of Europe and, in their turn, Eastern ideas are transplanted to Western soil, then centre and margin, in spite of their differences, no longer occupy antagonistic positions. In a postcolonial reading, centre and margin are no longer in opposition, but in "fated affinity," being part of a continuous process of cultural translation (Pana 15); if Britain is a model to be emulated, then Eastern Europe tells Britain what "it does not know" (Malouf 288, in Pana 15).

Remapping London as a multicultural city, Tremain rethinks it as a national symbol and cultural centre. She does not represent London as a big melting pot in which immigrant identity dissolves and disappears, but as an interactive space where Eastern European, Asian, Irish, and English characters preserve their individuality. London becomes a site of heterogeneity, a city accepting diversity, an urban topos ready to accept one's presence. To use Iris Marion Young's terminology, Tremain offers here "a vision of social relations affirming group difference," "in an openness of unassimilable otherness" (Young 226, in Löbbermann 584).

For the newcomer, London is neither a fully written text waiting to be deciphered, nor is it a blank page ready to be inscribed, but a catalogue of cultural references, a space incessantly (de)composed in accordance with one's horizon of expectations. The city appears as a mental construct that undergoes mutations, shaped by real and imaginary events – in Edwad Soja's words, London is a "real-and-imagined" space, which eludes the "real vs. imagined" dichotomy.

Lev sees London as the Promised Land, a cornucopia, a symbolic space of abundance and wealth, offering the prospect of a new life: "England is my hope," he says at the beginning of the book (5). Before going to London, he imagines and discovers it via cultural associations, his mental projections of the city being mostly shaped by mass media. Arriving in London, he feels the discrepancy between how he has imagined the English and how they really appear to him: the English "look grotesque to him, fat and mocking and sick," while his imaginary English (wo)man was modelled after "Alec Guinness in *Bridge on the River Kwai*, thin and quizzical, with startled eyes" or after "Margaret Thatcher, hurrying along with purpose, like an indigo bird" (35).

Not only does Lev's perception of the English gradually change, but also his understanding of the other immigrants. On his way to England, his imaginary projection of them is ridden with clichés:

> Someone had told him that in England vodka was too expensive to drink. Immigrants made their own alcohol from potatoes and tap water, and when Lev thought about these industrious immigrants, he imagined them sitting by a coal fire in a tall house, talking and laughing, with rain falling outside the window and red buses going past and a television flickering in a corner of the room (4-5).

By meeting other immigrant characters and establishing "contact zones" (Pratt 6-7), Lev changes his first impression; he starts acknowledging their presence. Thus, he encounters Sulima, who runs the Champions Bed and Breakfast Hotel (where he finds compassion and a good bed to sleep for the night); he meets Ahmed, the owner of a Kebab place (where he is given food and his first job); he is invited to the house of Larissa, an Eastern European married to an Englishman (where he has a tantalising glimpse of a comfortable middle class existence); and later he makes acquaintance with two Chinese vegetable pickers (whose sympathy for him involves homosexual feelings).

In his turn, Lev is perceived by the others in a variety of ways, ranging from friendly feelings to indifference, and even xenophobic attitudes. Arriving in London, he becomes keenly aware of his invisibility, of the others' refusal to see him, due to his Eastern European accent and appearance. Disorientated, he experiences a sense of "thrownness" into a boundless space, in a world whose linguistic codes and social rules he does not master (Heidegger 282). The simplest thing, such as inserting a coin in a slot at a station toilet, becomes a difficult task. His repeated question uttered in incorrect English – "May you help me?" – serves as a leitmotif and encodes a whole state of mind, expressing his confusion and perplexity, as well as his need for care and assistance.

In the big city, Lev feels alienated from himself, losing his self-assurance and beginning "to stagger" (35). An outcast, miles away from his family and home, without a job and lacking financial means, he is seen by the others as a terrifying stranger. Lev's encounter with a policeman, for instance, represents one of the most disturbing scenes in the novel: from the beginning he is placed into the position of an illegal Eastern European immigrant, an unwanted outsider whose body is searched, whose intimacy is tread upon. In order to stay in the U.K., Lev needs to have a legal passport and a permanent address. Mostly, he needs to conform to public norms and become integrated, as the policeman summarises in a few words: "No sleeping in streets. This is anti-social behaviour and liable to a heavy fine. So get yourself sorted. Clean your fucking shoes. Get a haircut, and you may just have a chance" (24).

To grab that chance, Lev has to work his way up, from being homeless (sleeping for a couple of nights on cardboard boxes in a lair under the road), to his first job (distributing leaflets for the Muslim kebab-shop), to the lowest job in a kitchen (washing dishes at a high-end restaurant), to working the fields (joining a gang of vegetable pickers in rural Suffolk), to being a chef (at Ferndale Heights, a care home, and later at Panno's taverna), to owning a restaurant (in Baryn, in his home country).

Each new job offers Lev the possibility to step across another threshold, to push another boundary. With hard work and with the help of three characters, Lydia, Sophie, and Christy, Lev is able to go beyond unsurpassable obstacles, climbing the professional and social ladder. Each of these characters plays a major role in his understanding of the new world, in making the British geography more comprehensible to his Eastern European mind.

Coming from the same country as Lev, Lydia is a former teacher of English and a translator. "A plump, contained person with moles like splashes of mud on her face" (1), she represents the moral voice in the novel. She is Lev's most useful translator, assisting him in finding accommodation and a job, encouraging him to keep going on the right track, paying the

necessary fine to get him out of prison. Like a *dea ex machina*, she helps Lev in every difficulty. In spite of this, their relationship does not evolve, as Lev is unable to respond to her sexual innuendoes or to offer her more than friendship. Their relationship comes to an abrupt end when Lydia refuses Lev the financial support to start a restaurant, showing a limited understanding of his dreams and ability to put them into practice.

A sous-chef at the GK Ashe restaurant, driven by the ambition to start her own establishment, Sophie, the English woman, is as another character that plays an important role in Lev's life. If "love is like a foreign land," to echo Judith Wright's famous line (108), then the erotic relationship between Lev and Sophie can be visualised in spatial terms. Sophie's "otherness" and "*newness of form*" make her "exotic like some far-away, sun-soaked place that smelled of sugar" (106). Her complete novelty fascinates Lev, who cannot identify her with any familiar female figure. However, Tremain does not allow her male character to step into the stereotypical role of the conqueror (of this feminine new territory); Lev is the conquered one, rather, seduced and later abandoned by Sophie. For him, the relationship with Sophie comes to weigh hard on his existential scales. To be sure, Sophie's lovemaking has therapeutic effects and Lev is able to move beyond the traumatic memory of Marina's death. Sophie heals Lev with her love, but also hurts him profoundly when she leaves him and starts a new relationship. Lev's final act of raping Sophie which abruptly terminates their relationship and puts an end to any possibility of friendship sheds an ambivalent light on his character, disclosing here the impulsive aspect of his personality.

Christy Slane, an alcoholic Irish plumber, who is divorcing his wife and suffering from not being allowed to see his daughter, is not only Lev's friend, but also a kindred mind – someone who passes through the same inner turmoil. Both characters long to recuperate a past of happiness, when they were not separated from the persons they loved: "Lev was transfixed for a moment, recognising something of himself in the other man, some willingness to surrender and not fight, some dangerous longing for everything to be over" (69). A special relationship is established between the two men who are both foreigners, non-Brits, each of them coming from a "minor" culture and being forced into a marginalised role. Listening to each other's story, "studying the other's periphery," they become conscious that interesting parallels can be drawn between apparently unrelated spaces (Brinzeu 99).

4. Auror – a *Praesentia in Absentia*

When Lev's attention turns inward, bracketing current reality, his mind wanders nostalgically to his native village, Auror – the micro-space that he is carrying in his heart. Tenderly envisaged in the peaceful, crepuscular light of evening, Auror is also a "real-and-imagined" place that is endlessly (re)shaped by Lev's memories, a *praesentia in absentia* never stabilised in his mind:

> [He] imagined the night falling on Auror, falling as it always fell on the fir-covered hills and the cluster of chimneys and the wooden steeple of the school house. And there in this soft night lay Maya, under the goose-down quilt, with one arm thrown out

> sideways, as if showing some invisible visitor the small room she shared with her grandmother: its two beds, its rag rug, its chest of drawers painted green and yellow, its paraffin stove, and its square window, open to the cool air and the night dews and the cry of owls […].
>
> It was a nice picture, but Lev couldn't get it to stabilise in his mind. The knowledge that when the Baryn sawmill closed Auror and half a dozen other villages like it were doomed kept obliterating the room and the sleeping girl and even the image of Ina, shuffling about in the dark before kneeling to say her prayers (15-16).

Tremain confesses in an interview that she did research for her novel and looked at twenty-first century life in Poland and Russia scrutinizing the layers of their recent histories in order to build a veridical image of this under-represented part of Europe. In a paradoxical way, she makes Westerners understand Eastern Europe by creating a space that in fact does not exist. Pertaining to nowhere and everywhere, this ubiquitous place can be associated with any Slavic country. Charting its history, geography, language, and customs, Tremain presents the reader with a culturally selected topography, a (de)composed space carefully made up of a set of places. The chosen toponyms, real or imaginary – the city of Baryn, the Yarbl market, and the Kalinin range – have a Slavic resonance. In the same line, some of the onomastic choices – Lev, Pyotor Greszler, Kowalski, and Vitas – are also Slavic.

In her configuration of this Slavic country, Tremain avoids stereotypical representations by (de)constructing it as an imagological cliché. Taking into account that Westerners often see Eastern Europe as an exotic place schematically defined in contrastive terms – either as an idealised land depicted in picturesque colours, or as a backward place outlined in negative tones – Tremain's focus on the East of Europe and her re-centring of this margin is suggestive of postcolonial strategies. Tremain's writing subverts an Orientalist (or rather, Occidentalist) discourse that defines the East as an (ex)centric, feminised world of mysticism and passivity.[2]

Tremain's main strategy here is to depict the East of Europe through the eyes of a native Eastern European who is nonetheless a dislocated character, an immigrant who goes to work abroad and later returns – an insider outsider. In this way, two visions of the same place are juxtaposed so that Lev's perception of his native land when he departs

> staring out at the land he was leaving: at the fields of sunflowers scorched by the dry wind, at the pig farms, at the quarries and rivers and at the wild garlic growing green at the edge of the road (1)

no longer corresponds with his impression when he comes back, staring

> at the abandoned farms and silent factories, at the deserted coal depots and lumber yards, at the new high-rise flats and the bright, flickering heartbeats of American franchises, at a world slipping and sliding on a precipice between the dark rockface of Communism and the seductive, light-filled void of the liberal market. (337)

It is as if his initial understanding of the beauty of his own country is put into perspective and constantly reframed by his acquisition of Western viewpoint. This enables him to become aware of the problems that his homeland has to face in the aftermath of communism, at a time of transition when economic changes transform the country's infrastructure (337). Coming back to Auror, Lev sees it in a new light and discovers its remoteness and isolation from the rest of the modern world: "all the years he's lived here, he'd never seen clearly how lonely, how far from all thriving worldly habitation Auror actually was" (338).

While abroad, Lev leads the double life of an exile, thinks through comparisons, and makes associations between the new place and the old one. Conjuring up memories, "pricking up his ears in order to hear the pianissimo of inner voices" (Jankélévitch 253), Lev envisages the recurrent images of his beloved ones: the luminous, reassuring presence of his daughter; the unrelenting, disapproving character of his mother; the haunting presence of his dead father, an existential model hard to challenge; mostly, Lev thinks of his dead wife, whose obsessive image persistently appears, bringing along dramatic moments, such as the birth of their daughter or Marina's agony on a hospital bed.

Lev remembers these past events, keeping them alive, re-imagining them, (re)placing them in an endless depository of meanings. They come to represent – as the Romanian philosopher Alexandru Dragomir would say – the intimacy of his being, "the most remote place from the public eye, what does not show itself, what exists by hiding itself" (116). With a Proustian flavour, Lev's memories are prompted by the smoke of a longed-for cigarette, by the smell of cherished food, or by the unusual colour of a flower.[3]

Significantly, Lev does not only remember his life story, but also narrates some biographical episodes to his foreign friends. This becomes part of Tremain's strategy of making the Eastern European *Weltanschauung* accessible to the Western mind. Maintaining the specificity of the place, tilting the balance between its physical reality and its symbolic value, Lev's stories introduce the Westerners to an unknown *topos*, aiming to create a (re)cognizsable geography. From a topographic zero and an unreadable map of meaning, this *elsewhere* gains a life of its own.

Thus, in one of the most suggestive stories told by Lev, the Eastern European space is (de)constructed by introducing an element of familiarity to the Western reader. The trip to buy an American car, a Chevrolet Phoenix for sale in the distant town of Glic, is just a pretext for juxtaposing two realities. In a post-communist country, the appearance of such a car is rare, and for Rudi, Lev's best friend, possessing it becomes his greatest ambition, a dream that would solve all current problems. The whole trip in an overheated train – the arrival in Glic in a snow blizzard, the guest house where they eat goulash and dumplings, the high cost of the car, and finally their return to Auror driving a car whose door breaks down and has to be fixed with "hinges from a baby's pram" (14) – conversely reveals the mirage of the West, the seductive power of a Western lifestyle.

5. Un-/Re-Mapping Space

Lev's story implicitly suggests that crossing borders may lead to a reconsideration of existential limits, pushing them to the extreme, so that what is absent and inconceivable

becomes present and familiar. If at the beginning of the book, he has a feeling of apprehension in front of the unknown and senses that his journey in England is "infinite, with no known ending or destination" (25), later on, he starts defining this seemingly amorphous space; he stretches his mind to understand and delimitate what initially seemed endless, so that what was incomprehensible becomes reachable. Gradually, he gets acclimatised to the new Western space, where he acquires a new social and professional identity and earns the trust and respect of his peers.

In spite of his success in England, Lev's heart remains tuned to the seasons of his native land. In the most intimate core of his being, Lev remains an exile, someone "who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another" (Seidel ix). This continuous mental relatedness and repeated return to a past kept alive transform his stay abroad into a short-term, meaningful effort. Invoking Tabori's insightful characterisation of the exilic mind, Lev can be seen as "someone who conceives his […] displacement as temporary" (27). In the same way as Odysseus, Lev can only consider his wanderings abroad as provisional.

And again, like Odysseus, our character has to pass through another excruciating experience: the estrangement from his beloved ones. As the cyclic structure of the novel brings Lev home, he has to overcome the most difficult obstacle, the distrust of those left behind:

> His dream, his heart's desire, his Great Idea was sailing closer, ever closer to him now, but there was one terrifying, insurmountable problem: far off in Baryn, where it would have its existence, no one waited for it. In his own country, where he longed to return, it wasn't even the empty piano shop of his sentimental reveries; it was nothing. It was nothing because no one trusted him any more (336).

Going back, he travels incognito, preferring "to arrive like this, a stranger in a world newly strange to him" (337). A stranger to the others, he becomes a stranger to himself. To quote Julia Kristeva, Lev realises that a foreigner "lives within [himself]," being "the hidden face of [his] identity" (1). As the local space is defamiliarised, Lev is surprised to find an unfamiliar element hidden in himself – a disquieting presence having the potential to destroy his inner "home" and annihilate any feeling of belonging.

While Lev's introspective gaze rediscovers things in a new light, his own image is permanently reshaped by the thoughts of the others. He feels unprotected when Rudi stares at him with awe or when his mother maintains her anger and suspicion. Mobilising his inner resources, he has to demonstrate to the others the validity of his plan, the possibility of having a prosperous future.

If "any answer does not come as the result of creative work, but as an operation of distilling existential facts" (Sora 31), then Lev's idea of opening his own restaurant in his country is triggered by the accumulation of professional experience. While at the beginning of the novel Lev feels disorientated and "devoid of a plan" (21), he gradually acquires the theoretical and practical knowledge that will enable him to take control of his life and will offer a prospect for social improvement.

Lev's restaurant comes to signify an intersecting site, a common ground between two cultures. Starting a new restaurant represents "a transcultural procedure" and it can be regarded as "a two-way, multi-level cultural interchange based on borrowings, displacements, and recreations" (Walter 149-50). Through Lev's entrepreneurial idea, a process of cultural transference takes place: using his experience accumulated in the West, he can embark on the difficult task of transforming the negative aspects of Eastern European cuisine. In the past, in communist restaurants, "waiters and waitresses had behaved like labour-camp guards, slamming down dishes of sinewy meat, sloshing out wine from dirty carafes, snatching their plates away before their meal was finished" (39). Adopting the impeccable manners learnt in the West, adapting the local savoury recipes, Lev brings an element of newness and freshness to his native country – a contribution to the economic change it has to undergo in the period of post-communist transition.

The symbolic postlude to the novel puts things into a comparative perspective: Christy Slane and his wife, Jasmina, come to visit Lev's country. Their appreciation for Lev's hospitality – the warm ambience of the restaurant, the meal cooked to perfection, the feeling of being part of a community – reveals how Eastern Europe can appear to the Western mind. Their trip to see the reservoir under which Lev's native village lies hidden is initiated by their desire to locate an imaginary topos, to see in reality the setting of Lev's stories. Through the creation of the dam on the river (to provide electricity for the entire area), this village has been flooded, wiped out from the face of the earth, and transformed into a space of memory. The village becomes a tomb, a spatial suspension within the country's geography.

For Lev, the creation of the dam represents both a catastrophic and a cathartic event, as it points to the irrevocable disappearance of his familiar universe, while also implying his liberation from an unbearable past. Seen from a broader perspective, this un-/re-mapping of space – this presence that becomes an absence – might draw attention to the East of Europe as a world that is slowly changing, parts of it disappearing to make room for technological improvement. Crucially, it is the testamentary function of the book to remind the reader of the traumatic implications produced by such changes, of the endless suffering of relocated lives.

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1 See Tremain's interview at http://www.orangeprize.co.uk.

2 In a recent article, Josep Armengol-Carrera redefines Said's Orientalism in relationship to the East of Europe: "While Edward W. Said originally defined Orientalism as the cultural, political, and economic control of three successive empires – British, French, American – over the Middle East, I argue that the concepts and relations of 'East' and 'West' have been radically redefined since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the downfall of Communism, suggesting that the introduction of Western/American capitalism and culture into Eastern Europe may also have become influenced by Orientalist discourses and views" (112). To illustrate his idea, Armengol-Carrera reads Arthur Phillips's *Prague* as a contemporary literary re-vision of Orientalism.

3 Otherwise, his memories belong to the ineffable – to the frailty of dreams or the density of silence. For example, remembering the episode of buying poinsettias, as a gift for his mother's birthday, Lev's "vibrant imagination" recreates the ambience of his village and its surroundings. Each moment of the trip – the early, hurried ride to the open-air market in Yarbl, the catastrophic feeling of not finding the desired flowers, the desolation of returning home empty-handed, and finally the redemptive encounter, "like a vision, in some lost village along the road," with an old woman selling poinsettias – can be seen as a phase in a quest for a symbolic flower whose "seeming

permanence in a world of perpetually fading and dying things" suggests perfection (7). As if to keep the balance of an imaginary pair of scales, the positive outcome of the poinsettias episode can be read in comparison with another significant scene in the novel: the night-fishing at Lake Essel, when Lev and Rudi "had made one of the strangest discoveries of their lives" (50). Their excitement at the thought of catching buckets of fish for sale, by directing the flash of the headlights onto the water, their youthful jokes and sense of easiness are set in contrast with the solemn atmosphere of the moonlit lake, the uncanny feeling of witnessing something alien embodied by the blue fish. The impossibility of catching the shimmering fish – like numinous creatures from another world – comes to represent a failed encounter with the supernatural, leaving its dangerous imprint on the human world.

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University of Bucharest