

INTERIM REPORT OF THE BULGARIAN SOCIETY FOR THE DIFFUSION OF USEFUL IGNORANCE

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This presentation introduces the wit, wisdom, and weirdness of six contemporary Bulgarian writers: Stanislav Stratiev, Radoy Ralin, Emil Andreev, Ilko Dimitrov, Ivan Cholakov, and Vazken Nalbantian. It also introduces my English translations of prose and poetry by these authors, to be published by Faber Press. The works included in the anthology are Stratiev's *Landscape With Dog* (Пейзаж с куче) and *The Bulgarian Way* (Българският модел); Ralin's *Badlands* (Дяволска територия) and *Hot Peppers* (Люти чушки), Andreev's *The News from Lom* (Ломски разкази); Dimitrov's *God in New York* (Бог в Ню Йорк); Cholakov's *Alone in the Rain* (Сам в дъжда); and Nalbantian's *Incantations* (Разковници).

Key words: Contemporary Bulgarian prose and poetry; Bulgarian-English translation

“We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that knowledge is power, and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense: for what is most of our boasted so-called knowledge but a conceit that we know something, which robs us of our actual ignorance?”
Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

I

First, a few words about how this anthology of contemporary Bulgarian prose and poetry came to be. While the final English version the collection is entirely my responsibility, it is the work of many hands. I first became interested in literary translation when I was a member of the Columbia University Creative Writing Program in the mid-1970's. In those days I translated authors who had long been in English: Flaubert, Montaigne, Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Akhmatova, among others, and I was encouraged in my efforts when I won a prize for a translation of Akhmatova's

narrative poem “At the Very Edge of the Sea.” Also, since my M.A. studies at the University of Utah and my Ph.D. work at The University of Texas at Austin were in Comparative Literature, an interdisciplinary program requiring knowledge of at least two languages other than English, I was constantly working in French and Russian and translating from those languages into English. My acquaintance with Bulgarian began with Old Church Slavic (also known as Old Church Slavonic and Old Bulgarian – Старобългарски) at Utah and Columbia, since these were required courses for Russian majors. But my real introduction to Bulgaria and Bulgarian began in 1987, when I was a Fulbright lecturer in American Literature at Veliko Tarnovo University. At the end of that Fulbright year, I married a Bulgarian and so gained a long-lasting familial connection to her country and native language. In addition to my current teaching duties at Plovdiv University and Veliko Tarnovo University, which include a graduate course in translation studies, from 2011 until 2013 I was engaged by the Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism to provide Bulgarian-English translations for the ministry’s official website, describing and extolling the country’s natural and cultural attractions.

In 1988, while on I was on my honeymoon at the Black Sea, I noticed Stanislav Stratiev’s *Пейзаж с куче* (*Landscape with Dog*) at a book stall while I was out strolling one afternoon. At the time I knew nothing of the celebrated playwright and satirist; I was simply fascinated by the book’s title. The following year, when my wife and I were staying with my sister and her family in upstate New York, I decided to attempt a translation of Stratiev’s wryly humorous stories, to improve my Bulgarian facility and to better acquaint myself with Stratiev’s idiosyncratic comic genius. I returned to Bulgaria on a second Fulbright in 1993, to lecture in American Literature and American Studies at Plovdiv University, and stayed on for two more years at the university, before accepting a guest professorship at the Vilnius University Humanities Campus in Kaunas, Lithuania. Before I left for Lithuania in 1997, I was able to publish my translation of *Landscape with Dog*, along with another collection of Stratiev’s satire, *Българският модел* (*The Bulgarian Way*), with the support of the Open Society Foundation. The work of Radoy Ralin, another notable Bulgarian satirist, was recommended to me by Bulgarian colleagues in the early 1990’s. Ralin had been a dissident voice during the Zhivkov years, but after 1989 he was for many a cult hero, a combination of a doughty sage and a puckish rock star. I also attempted a translation of Ralin’s *Люти чушки* (*Hot Peppers*), the collection of barbed epigrams that led to his house arrest, as mentioned in the introduction to the epigrams by Boris Tashev.

The English version of Mr. Dimitrov's *Бог в Ню Йорк* (*God in New York*), completed in 2005, was commissioned by the author. Mr. Dimitrov's aphoristic, impressionistic, and sometimes runic prose (or prose poetry) reminds me of such seminal works as Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* or *Arcades*, Walter Benjamin's aphoristic, compendious meditation on Paris – or at least in Paris; he uses Paris as a setting for his comments on anything and everything that interests him.

I met Emil Andreev through the owner of Faber Publishing House. Emil graduated from Veliko Tarnovo University in English Language Studies, and to date has published three collections of stories, three plays, and three novels. His novel *Стъклената река* (*River of Glass*) won a national book award and was made into a film by Boyana Studios. *Ломски разкази* (*The News from Lom*) was his first publication, in 1996. Many of the English versions of the stories from that collection began as assignments that I gave to graduate students in the Linguistics and Translation Program at Plovdiv University in 2007; I am most grateful for their contributions. The same textual history and proviso holds for the two other collections included here by colleagues at Plovdiv University – Ivan Cholakov's *Сам в дъжда* (*Alone in the Rain*) and Vazken Nalbantian's *Разковници* (*Incantations*). Both of these authors are my colleagues at Plovdiv University, and I was present at the launch of their books to be included in the anthology. Given the requirements of the conference proceedings publication, I am including only selected comments from my conference presentation.

II

In the graduate translation courses that I have taught, we have surveyed a wide range of approaches to translation, which I would place on a continuum from literal, word-for-word, interlinear formal equivalence between source text and target language, to dynamic adaptations that seek to render the source language in terms most amenable to the target language's inherent possibilities. The most prolific and most highly respected translators represented in the anthologies that I have used in these seminars differ radically in their preferred approaches. (The anthologies I have in mind are *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, and *Theories of Translation*, edited by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet; I have also employed Jeremy Munday's *Introducing Translation Studies*.)

Given this possible continuum, my personal preferences as a translator would place me closer to those who prefer dynamic equivalence to formal equivalence, to borrow terms that Eugene Nida uses, though I cer-

tainly agree with Ezra Pound, Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Louis Borges, and Walter Benjamin when they stress the need to pay close attention to the source text. For Benjamin, “the interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation.” For Pound, the value of a poetic translation is to “assist the hurried student who has a smattering of a language and the energy to read the original text alongside the metrical gloss.” And for Nabokov, the ideal translation comes equipped with “copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity.”

I steer by other stars. I rely on felicitous interpretation and even at times judicious improvisation, so as to render the new text and context intelligible to a given target audience. I agree with I. A. Richards, when he says that a translator needs to identify the crucial *constellations of meaning* of a given text in context, so as to incorporate those constellations in the newly-formed galaxy that is the finished translation. In this anthology, that means certain Bulgarian *realia* are not slavishly duplicated if I feel they can be more felicitously offered in terms more familiar to my imagined English-speaking audience. What’s more, I have come to dislike a rash of footnotes or endnotes to explain such *realia*, for the same reason that I dislike inessential details or obfuscation in a story or poem that slows its progress and narrows its scope. Granted, there is a measure of gain and loss in my approach; the translation loses some of its foreignness and is less faithful – recalling the old sexist saw that a translation, like a woman, can be either faithful or beautiful, but not both. My “dynamism” would no doubt be derided by many of the stars that shine in the firmament of my course anthologies – Benjamin, Pound, and Nabokov, for instance. But toward the other end of my stellar continuum, Eugene Nida and friends would most likely encourage me.

How do I know? Perhaps an example would be helpful here. When considering a translation into an African language of King David’s prayer of contrition that is Psalm 51, Nida suggests that the passage “wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” would make little or no sense to an audience that had never seen snow. So he prefers to change “whiter than snow” to “whiter than an egret’s feathers.” Similarly, when I was fishing for a suitable English equivalent for the title of Stanislav Stratiev’s short story “Бяла врана” (literally, “White Crow”) I resorted to something that I thought my implied audience would be more likely to recognize. I chose “Black Sheep.” I changed the color; I changed the animal. But I was and remain convinced that I had rightly recognized and recast the constellation

of meaning. Whether white or black, whether crow or sheep, the individual to whom the epithet refers is portrayed as a vilified outsider – a derogatory epithet that proves highly ironic as the story progresses.

My preferred approach to translation has been further conditioned by my reading of such diverse theorists of language and culture as Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and José Ortega y Gasset. These august authorities all recognize the inevitable play of the signifier (Derrida); the instability of a text and the need for a community of interpretation (Fish); the power of *significance* and *semiosis*, whether complementing or opposed to signification and semiotics (Kristeva and Barthes); the obtuse third meaning that falls between denotative and connotative binary oppositions (Barthes); and the uncanny power of *punctum* in relation to *studium* (again Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*). All of these contemporary theorists would be sympathetic to what José Ortega y Gasset calls the *misery and splendor of translation*. Exact equivalence is inevitably a utopian dream, an unattainable goal. But just because an ultimate goal can't be reached, that is no reason not to fare forth, y Gasset urges; just because there can be no one and only definitive translation (as there can be no ultimate "proper meaning"), that is no reason not to explore the myriad possibilities that a dialogue between languages offers us. Recognition of language's inevitable slippages, traces, and ruptures can be liberating. The play of language provides the motive force for creative writing. That is why this anthology, while seeking to enact a dialogue between contemporary Bulgarian writers and their potential English readers, recognizes and respects the importance of linguistic play and the value of dynamic equivalence.

III

EMIL ANDREEV was born in 1956 and earned his university degree in English Language and Literature from Veliko Turnovo University. He has worked as a teacher, journalist, translator, and English lecturer in the Theology Department at Sofia University. In 2005, a four-member jury awarded his novel *The Glass River* one of Bulgaria's highest honors for literature, the Vick Prize. This novel was later adapted as a film by Boyana Studios in Sofia. Since Andreev is also a dramatist, he has many friends and acquaintances in artistic and intellectual circles. But he prefers to spend long periods of isolation in the mountains, where he has only one neighbour and no electricity. This love for solitude and meditation has led his friends to affectionately call him "the Hermit." The collection of stories included here is both a masterful tribute to Lom's local color and a recognition of his hometown's eccentricities, limits, and rare virtues, as rare as rare earth. It is

not exactly satire, though there are moments of queer humor. The people Andreev presents to us are sometimes ridiculous, sometimes poignant, often solitary, and occasionally insane or haunted by ghosts. They inhabit a harshly circumscribed world that is at times is real or at least realistic, and at other times surreal or magically real. This suggests certain generic and aesthetic connections: James Joyce's *Dubliners*, Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*, Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesberg, Ohio*, Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* or her Wyoming stories, and even Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. As a matter of fact, Andreev doesn't need me to introduce his tales. He does so himself, masterfully. Here is part of his introduction, in my translation:

Everyone with a shred of personality has an ancestral village. It's not the place where they were born and raised, but the place where their memories and dreams reside. Usually, it is a place without shape or shadow, a place from which passion and ambition have been banished along with beggars and wild animals. Its streets may be empty, but snatches of melody linger and mingle with fleeting aromas, a stray word or two rises out of context, and the sound of a whistle or horn becomes the sonorous tolling of a bell. Sounds are muted there, distinguishing features blur. When the nerves wear too thin, or when you come to prefer the timeless village to where you were born or where you live now, the blurred edges crystallize in bright, dreamlike focus. Then, before you realize what has happened, you drift away... It is in this sense and with these qualifications that I call this collection of stories "The News from Lom." Here people and towns long gone regain their shape and substance. As the Danube gathers its tribute from the Schwarzwald tributaries for the journey to the world's oceans, so over the years I have gathered grain by grain the dust of these characters from their eternal ancestral villages. Today, as what was once our home recedes into the collective memory of World History, a dream drifting unawares toward some rough-hewn destiny, the significant soil of these villagers, the once-fertile **loam** riddled with weathering shards, takes on an uncanny resemblance to the haunted, hallowed village we call Bulgaria.

There are nineteen exceptionally insightful and inventive stories in this constantly surprising collection, which is far, far more than local color, though Lom and vicinity are almost always the stories' locale. Andreev's tales unfold like riddles to be solved or fey jokes with disconcerting punch lines. They are anti-worlds of myth, fable, and fairytale that flow in and around his characters, as the Danube flows within a stone's throw his *haunted, hallowed village* of Lom.

IV

ILKO DIMITROV was born in 1955 in Sofia. He has pursued what at first would appear to be incompatible vocations. He is a lawyer who served as Bulgaria's Deputy Minister of Defense from 2003 to 2005, and he was a member of Parliament for the Fortieth Bulgarian National Assembly. But he is also a highly respected poet and a long-time member of the Bulgarian Writers Association. Of course Mr. Dimitrov is not the only celebrated writer who also practiced law or entered politics. We need only recall the great American poet Wallace Stevens, who was also a lawyer, and insurance executive; the Mexican Nobel laureate and diplomat Octavio Paz; or the Czech playwright Václav Havel, who after enduring years of oppression as a political dissident served as Czechoslovakia's last president and the Czech Republic's first. (At the time of his death in 2011, President Havel was chairman of the New York based Human Rights Foundation.)

Mr. Dimitrov's first poetry collection, *Attempt at a Definition*, was published in 1989. Since then, he has published nine more volumes of poetry, two volumes of prose (including the work included in this anthology, *God in New York*, published in 2010), and a children's book. In 1999, he received the annual Bulgarian Writers Association award for *The Park*, and his *The Thread Seller* earned him the Ivan Nikolov National Poetry Award for 2009.

In *One-Way Street*, Walter Benjamin provides an insight that I feel applies to the work of Mr. Dimitrov in general and to *God in New York* in particular. "To great writers, finished works have a weight lighter than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives. For only the more feeble and distracted take an inimitable pleasure in conclusions, feeling themselves thereby given back to life. For the genius, each caesura, and the heavy blows of fate, fall like gentle sleep itself into his labor. About it he draws a charmed circle of fragments." In *Arcades*, a great jumble of speculative thought, keen observation, and painstaking accumulation of detail, Benjamin has given us one of the great meditations on one of the world's great cities – over 800 pages in the English translation. Dimitrov's work is much more modest than Benjamin's, though equally disquieting, as the pregnant fragments of Fernando Pessoa's (or his heteronym Bernardo Soares') *Book of Disquiet* is disquieting. Like Pessoa's avatar Soares, Dimitrov prefers to arrange his fragments and *aperçus* as prose, or prose poetry. "In prose we speak freely. We can incorporate musical rhythms, and still think. We can incorporate poetic rhythms, and yet remain outside them... prose encompasses all art,

in part because words contain the whole world, and in part because the untrammelled word contains every possibility for saying and thinking.”

God in New York consists of 65 prose fragments that address the inscrutable Cosmos, God and Nature, the rift between Cartesian duality and Eastern mysticism, the price of urban modernity and technological advance, and the ongoing dialogue between Platonic forms and pragmatic imperatives – such as where to get a decent cup of coffee and escape from the cold on a winter’s day in Manhattan. Better than a general summary, perhaps a representative sampling of these fragments can give a sense of what Mr. Dimitrov has achieved.

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It has been proven – New York will not tolerate abstractions, disputation the leads nowhere. This city, this escape from the scholastic, this intolerance of imperious discourse on eternal topics, has led me to the following theses: You decide about God (God does not make the decision, you do). While you live, your life depends on you. Your point of view is unique, but it becomes relevant only if you are able to reach a compromise with the others. To live is to be grateful...

65

A man steps onto the coupling of a moving train on the Sixth Avenue Line and takes a piss. As a witness to this act (on its dry side), I wonder which is the appropriate modern response – to attempt to characterize the behavior of the peeing individual (using a plus or minus), or simply to register it without any emotion, without any attempt at formulation? Anyway, the question is now pointless, since my stop is almost here and I have to get off.

V

IVAN CHOLAKOV was born in 1961 and graduated in Slavic Philology from Plovdiv University. His writing bears some resemblance to the satire of Stratiev and Ralin, though with a difference. In *Alone in the Rain*, published in 2012, Ivan introduces us to the hopes, disappointments, and misadventures of his sometimes admirable, sometimes pathetic protagonist. Cholakov calls his sad-sack Гъби Гъбев Гъбев (literally, Mushroom Mushroom Mushroom), rechristened in the present English translation as Furgus Fungus. Fungus fits any of these descriptions: a clueless lamb for the slaughter; a gentle, long-suffering anti-hero; or a first cousin to a comic-book character from *L’il Abner* with an unpronounceable family name, Joe Btfspk, described by Wikipedia as “a very lonely little man.” Joe Btfspk always has a rain cloud over his head, and misfortune follows

him wherever he goes. That in a nutshell, is Furgus Fungus. Fungus is a loner whose only scrap that the society he has faithfully served throws his way is a miniscule, misshapen apartment that isn't even a hole in the wall, but a hole in the hall – a smidgeon of hallway converted into something like living space. What's more, when his factory takes its first baby-steps toward restructuring, Furgus is the first to get laid off.

The stories in the collection present his various misadventures; no matter the existential or social upheaval during the transition, Furgus almost always loses. Without wanting to, he finds himself entangled in his society's Byzantine ventures: Ponzi schemes and investment pyramids, advertising clips (for mushrooms – what else?), petty bureaucrat, (faint) hope for decent work abroad, encounters with other put-upon underlings or with vicious schemers... along with the few tiny pleasures that glimmer in the grayness of his generally miserable life.

The chronicles of Furgus' days and ways are sad stories, and what befalls him is often distressing. But the stories make for surprisingly enjoyable reading. Cholakov's prose is precise and transparent, and he eschews cheap rhetorical effects or maudlin sentimentality. These are powerful stories, both psychologically and aesthetically, characterized by sympathy and compassion. They offer not only a portrait of a likeable, unlucky loser but also a social and psychological portrait of an age, in miniature."

One of the stories that I find particularly touching puts poor Furgus in the grasping hands of his scheming thug of a cousin, Kiro Kirov. Kirov tricks Furgus (Furgus is easily tricked) into signing over his half of the house in a small village that their aunt has left them. Kirov promises to preserve the house and its memories, which are dear to Furgus. His aunt had pined away her life waiting for her beloved husband to return, but he was a dissident killed by the Communists. In another story, Furgus pretends to be her long-lost husband when he arrives at her death bed, so as to give her at least a small measure of comfort. But Kirov cares nothing about family memories. He sells the property as soon as he can to the highest bidder, so that the house can be torn down and a tourist hotel built in its place. Furgus is devastated by the betrayal. At the end of the story, he picks his way through the rubble, hoping to find at least some shred of his aunt's life, to honor her lifelong faithfulness.

"Heavily, wearily, Furgus made his way to the trailers. He had no idea what he was looking for. He hoped to find something, anything that could ease the pain a little. He started digging in the broken furniture that now served as fuel for the fire, pieces of table and chairs, his aunt's bed... then he saw the cor-

ner of a picture frame sticking out from under one of the reinforced concrete pilings that supported the barbed wire fence. Furgus tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. But he kept trying, getting some leverage from one of the broken chair legs. He finally managed to move one of the pilings enough to see what was beneath it – it was the wedding photo, the very same picture that had kept his aunt's hopes alive for all those years, while she waited for her husband to return. The glass was broken and smeared and the frame was bent. After another long struggle, Fungus finally managed to extricate the picture from the piling. The struggle left his fingers bloodied; a piece of glass had cut his hand.

But Furgus didn't even notice the pain in his hand, since the pain in his heart was so much greater. He held the picture in its misshapen frame and began to cry. His tears flowed from a deep well. He was not ashamed. His was a happy oblivion, a catharsis. They were helpless tears, desperate tears, the tears of the dispossessed. But they were also tears of joy and love. The photograph and the tears were all that he had of his aunt now. The tears and blood from his injured hand mingled to form a rose-colored rivulet on the picture's broken glass. But none of it – not the broken glass; not the blood, sweat, and tears; not the dust of all her long-lost years – could dim the smiles of those two young lovers."

VI

VAZKEN NALBANTIAN was born in 1965 and earned his undergraduate degree from Plovdiv University in Bulgarian Philology, where he currently teaches Mythology and Religion. His first collection of poetry, *Land of the Tetrarchs*, was published in 2003. In the same year, Vazken received an award for his innovative work from the Southern Spring Literary Competition, and in the same year he was nominated for the Plovdiv Literary Prize. The collection included here, *Incantations* (2006), is his second book of poetry.

The poems in this remarkable collection consider sixteen "occupations", most of which are relatively ordinary, though some could be called eclectic or archaic; he portrays a bell ringer, a carter, a printer, a goldsmith, a carpet weaver, an icon painter, a cobbler, a sailor, a chimney sweep, a stonemason, a butcher, a blacksmith, a bricklayer, a potter, a chef, and a physician (healer). But these are not ordinary artisans. Bell ringers hear the moon tremble and know the secret of shadows. Carters remember what their fathers taught them about mortality, and set fire to every cart they meet. Printers find their letters in midsummer air, and waking from silk sheets, like ardent lovers lift the skirts of their books. Goldsmiths are alchemists and demiurges, since they mint the heads of dead gods. The carpet weavers rest their heavy thighs on time's threads, ready for their creation to carry them aloft. The icon painter's palette is rays of sun light after

a rain. The cobbler sews with slanting shadows and must always walk barefoot. The sailor's boat scrapes the skies, and he sails on and on, to pay the debt of his life. Chimney sweeps walk not only on rooftops but on mountaintops, and will only tip their hats from the highest peaks – perhaps to the Cheshire cat in the hat that leads them a merry chase, like a porous passage going nowhere. Stone masons are pilgrims seeking to look into eyes that have eluded them for years. Like a force of nature – like erosion – they carve the faces of cliffs. The butcher's cleaver catches fire every Sunday, and the blacksmith's horseshoes, forged with such a price that they cripple their maker, confound steed and rider. The bricklayer's tools are an ass's hide and the scales of a dragon. He bows beneath the weight he must carry like Abraham stooping beneath a ram in a thicket. Potters bring their pots to life. Chefs reenact the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. The healer awaits us on the far shore, where he returns to us our incorruptible bodies, while our winding sheets unravel in the wandering winds. As an illustration of Mr. Nalbantian's poetic insight, here is a poem from his exceptional collection.

The Healer

You can only reach him
with a guide
who digs in the earth
for a boat.
When you find
down deep
the body of water,
you pay him
with a gold coin.
His is the river
they all call
oblivion.
He fills the sheet
with shovels of dirt
and damns the candle
that lights the way.
The boat sails no further.
The healer waits on that far shore.
He looses the winding sheet
and gives you back the body.
The threads will unravel
with the wandering winds.

VII

While translating the writers included in this anthology, I was constantly reminded that the work I was doing was more than a mechanical matching of self-evident Bulgarian and English equivalents. I was engaged in an ongoing dialogue between often incompatible world views, and my often thankless task was to attempt to find enough points of agreement between them to carry off the unwieldy “carrying over”. As the prominent British psychiatrist, literary essayist, and cultural critic Adam Phillips points out in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature*, “Without translation in its familiar sense of transferring from one language into another, and in its more metaphorical sense of moving across, or removing to another place, there can be no sense of history, of alternatives, of aspirations, or of possibilities. And contemporary so-called multicultural societies depend for their viability on their members’ enthusiasm, however ambivalent, for translation. Our relation to translation has become a virtual synonym for our relationship to ourselves.”

If I apply this general insight to my translations, it would be reasonable to conclude that I was talking to myself. But as I entered the imaginary worlds of such writers as Stanislav Stratiev, Radoy Ralin, Emil Andreev, Nina Nenova, Ilko Dimitrov, Ivan Cholakov, and Vazken Nalbantian, I lost track of who the self was that was doing the talking, who the self was that was carefully attending the discourse, and who the self was that was doing the translating – the carrying over. The “I” became a chorus, and the chorus spoke for a whole cloud of witnesses, and potentially to all those who will read this anthology. This plurality has long been recognized as a fact of literary life; after all, the likes of Shakespeare and Dickens are all the Romeos, Juliets, and Hamlets; the Little Dorrits and Oliver Twists they created, as surely as Fernando Pessoa is all of his heteronyms or Eminem is all the Slim Shadies that (please) stand up. “I” is another, declared Rimbaud. This irreducible plurality can be a blessing rather than a curse. There is good reason to accept this somewhat disquieting notion – variously understood as art in an age of mechanical and digital reproduction (Benjamin); the post-structuralist, postmodern age of simulacra (Baudrillard); the play of the signifier (Derrida, Lacan); the death of the author (Roland Barthes); or the impossibility of a single unitary, authentic text (Stanley Fish).

Again, to refer to Adam Phillips and *Promises, Promises*, we must entertain “ [...] the strangely plausible possibility that there is no original text, no essential self (or version of the self); that there are just an unknowable series of translations of translations; preferred versions of ourselves,

but not true ones. So we need not aim to get closer to our true selves – or to be better and better at being authentic – so much as be available for re-translation whenever we suffer and desire. And that we need not only suffer other people’s re-descriptions of us, but that we can also enjoy some of them, and be interested in the fact that this is what we are doing with each other.”

Both instinctively and for these somewhat recondite reasons, I find the authors in this collection endlessly fascinating. It is my heartfelt desire that those who read these works in English will find them equally so. As Emil Andreev says in his introduction to *The News from Lom* – approximately and unwittingly confirming a view held by Hillary Rodham Clinton – it only takes a single village – a haunted, hallowed village – to evoke an entire nation, and beyond that nation, our global village.