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# UNDER BECH'S EYES: EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF THE EUROPEAN EAST IN JOHN UPDIKE'S SHORT STORIES<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

John Updike's short stories about Henry Bech's diplomatic adventures in the European East have been analysed mainly in the context of the Cold-War balance of power and Updike's ambivalent attitude to communist Russia. While the hard-boiled politics constitute the backdrop of Bech's cultural mission, the three stories which I discuss in this essay entertain tensions between the official and the personal, which in turn shape the protagonist's representations of Eastern European others. Accordingly, by combining imagology with elements of geocriticism and affect studies, this essay explores how cultural patterns of perceiving alterity are intertwined with emotions to produce Bech's *emotional geographies* of the European East, which in mapping the other reflect back on and consolidate Bech's American self.

## RESUMEN

Los relatos cortos de John Updike sobre las aventuras diplomáticas del escritor Henry Bech en el Este de Europa han sido estudiados principalmente en el contexto de la Guerra Fría y de la ambivalente actitud de Updike hacia la Rusia comunista. Mientras que la dura política constituye el telón de fondo de la misión cultural de Bech, en los tres relatos analizados existen tensiones entre lo oficial y lo

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personal que a su vez nutren la imagen del otro. Así pues, en este ensayo se combina la imagología con elementos de geocrítica y los estudios del afecto, para explorar cómo las percepciones culturales se entrelazan con las emociones, produciendo las *geografías emocionales* del Este Europeo, que, al trazar la imagen del otro, reflejan y consolidan la identidad norteamericana de Henry Bech.

Imagology, a branch of comparative literature which analyses images of selfhood and otherness in literature and other media, aims at objectivity and neutrality which stand in sharp contrast to the nature of the object of study: a representation which by definition is based on impressions and feelings, rather than precise empirical observation and methodological accuracy. The way we perceive ourselves and our others—nations, people and places—tends to involve preconceptions which in turn lead us to making generalizations about what German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder termed *Volksgeist*: a collective spirit or essence of a nation (Johnson 143). History has amply demonstrated the dangers inherent in subsuming individuals into national rubrics. Though initially harmless, Herder's conception of *Volksgeist* eventually turned into a double-edged sword at the hands of Nazi ideology. It is precisely not to fall into the trap of taking stereotypes for reality that imagologists adopt a position of scientific neutrality and objectivity when analyzing national representations.

Belgian comparatist Hugo Dyserinck observed that to assure critical rigor and neutrality of the process of analysis, imagology must begin at a *supranational* level in order to expose layers of meaning which have accumulated around national representations (n.p.). In other words, imagologists should assume as distanced a position as possible in order to dissect stereotypes and reveal the social, cultural and political components which make up the tissue of national images. Feelings and emotions should be kept on a tight rein if one is to approach and study the discourse on selfhood and otherness objectively and from a historical perspective. That said, there is no denying the fact that national representations thrive on subjectivity, while the process of charting mental maps of alterity is, to a large degree, *affectual*. Impressions of and feelings towards otherness are shaped by what we already know—the preconceptions we hold of the object we see and/or interact with. As Walter Lippmann put it:

For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture (55).

This is where imagology comes in, approaching national images in terms of intricate cultural constructs and examining possible intertexts which may have contributed to their formation.

Whilst informed by the principles and methods of imagology, the present essay focuses less on the historical contextualization of national imagery than the role which feelings and emotions play in the construction of alterity. In other words, it is space, rather than time that I wish to concentrate on. I propose to travel back to the bipolar spaces of the Cold War to trace American *imaginative geographies* (Said) of the European East, as refracted through the eyes of John Updike's second best literary protagonist: Jewish-American novelist, Henry Bech.

In what follows, I will explore Bech's journeys through the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in three short stories: "Rich in Russia," "Bech in Rumania" and "The Bulgarian Poetess," all of which were written for *The New Yorker* between 1965 and 1970 and then published jointly in *Bech: A Book* (1970).<sup>2</sup> To this aim, I will combine insights provided by imagology with elements of geocriticism and broadly understood affect studies. Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation will be employed to explore how emotions and space interact to produce a representation of otherness which is at once a reflection of the self. When discussing sentiments, I will not draw a sharp line between emotion and affect. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the latter lends itself better to thinking about "embodied practices that produce visible conduct as an outer lining" (Thrift 60), that is, the way our bodies instinctively react to and interact with the world. By focusing on *emotional geographies* of the European East in John Updike's short stories, I will pay attention

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I follow the order in which the stories were published in *Bech: A Book*, which in turn reflects Updike's travel itinerary. It is noteworthy, however, that Updike first introduced Bech in "The Bulgarian Poetess," which was composed at the end of 1964 and published in *The New Yorker* in 1965. All the subsequent quotations from individual stories come from the Penguin edition of John Updike's *The Complete Henry Bech* (2006).

not only to the feelings that Bech projects onto the places he visits and the people he interacts with, but also to different ways in which this *embodied otherness* affects him. In this sense, I hope to show that the process of mapping alterity is bidirectional as, to use the jargon of imagology, the *spected* (the entity that is perceived), in all its shades, incarnations and atmospheres, and the *spectant* (here the one who observes) interact and mutually affect each other on different planes.

A few words are due about the context in which the stories under discussion were produced. In 1953, the year of Joseph Stalin's death, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was founded with the aim of promoting American interests and values abroad. Following Stalin's death and the subsequent liberalization in the U.S.S.R. under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, "a season of dialogue" opened in the U.S.-Soviet cultural relations (Pells 86). The 1958 Agreement for Cultural Exchange, signed between Dwight D. Eisenhower's and Nikita Khrushchev's administrations, inaugurated a period of bilateral exchanges whose official aim was to promote better understanding between the countries and their people. The project involved people-to-people visits, exhibitions, writers' conferences, diplomatic delegations, and university exchanges, among others. In 1964, John Updike, aged thirty-two, was invited to travel to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the function of American Cultural Ambassador. On coming back from his state-sponsored tour Updike needed a vessel to voice his impressions of the places he had visited and the people he had encountered. To this purpose, he created the character of Henry Bech. In this sense, Bech emerges as a product of his times, whose literary existence overlaps with the years of the Cold War. However, if Updike's most famous Cold-War (anti)hero, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, epitomizes the novelist's favorite turf, American middleness, then Henry Bech connotes the kind of life that became Updike's once his career as a writer got under way. As a well-known novelist, Bech spends a considerable amount of time performing authorial duties, touring the country to read and discuss his and others' works. One such invitation comes from the State Department and Bech obligingly agrees to visit the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, mimicking Updike's 1964 diplomatic stint.

Although one is tempted to identify Henry Bech with John Updike, there is much to discourage such impulse. In fact, Updike himself said that Bech was "an anti-Updike, as far as [he] could

conceive of one" (qtd. in De Bellis 88). Bech is thus an unmarried and childless Jewish author with a liberal slant, who served in World War II and lives in New York. Most importantly, however, he is plagued by an affliction which Updike managed to avoid entirely: writer's block. According to Jack de Bellis, by making Bech into a Jew, Updike artistically exploited "a major force in American fiction, the Jewish novelist" (90). That said, some scholars have found fault with Bech's ethnicity, most notably Cynthia Ozick. According to Ozick (1970), Bech's Jewishness is merely a collection of ethnic stereotypes and misconceptions about the kind of intellectual and emancipated Jewishness that Bech is supposed to connote. To put it bluntly, Henry Bech as a Jew does not hold water. While Sanford Pinsker concurs with Ozick in that Updike's engagement with ethnicity in Bech stories produces a "sociological 'atmosphere' rather than a serious (Jewish) vision," he also points out that Bech was not destined to convey any such view ("Updike" 96). Updike might have been driven by "curiosity and a dash of healthy competitiveness," but his decision to adopt the figure of Jewish-American novelist for his purposes had less to do with ethnicity than with this figure's emblematic status at the time and the pitfalls that came with it: "If the heyday of American-Jewish writing was the 1950s, the following decade was characterized by trappings of literary success" (Pinsker, "John" 98). Therefore, if Bech sounds at times as a parody, it is not a parody of Jewishness, but rather, as Derek Parker Royal puts it, "a case study in contemporary American authorship" providing Updike with a vehicle for passing "a rather mischievous or even impish commentary on the expected role of the writer to take on roles, to be a character" (38). In other words, *Bechiana* is to a large extent concerned with performativity, since "the protagonist is constantly donning masks, taking on personas, playacting in ways that both satisfy yet confound his audience's expectations" (Parker Royal 39).

On top of the identities he incarnates, an American, an Ashkenazi Jew and a (blocked) writer, another one is added, that of a cultural ambassador or a mediator between his country of origin and the cultural other, "who transforms and negotiates intercultural spaces" (Keller 357). Bech's fluid, liminal identity is to be borne in mind when studying his behaviour behind the Iron Curtain, since the maps he charts along the way reflect a *mélange* of values, emotions and affects which fuel each of his selves. Moreover, since Bech's diplomatic function is modelled after Updike's stint as the Cultural Ambassador under the auspices of the U.S. State

Department, he may also be interpreted as a vehicle for conveying Updike's views, and, in a broader perspective, as reflecting American imaginative geographies of the bipolar world at the time. Therefore, in the stories Bech's/Updike's emotions collide productively with traditions, as the resultant mental maps entertain tensions between personal feelings, cultural representations and official patterns of perceiving alterity.

### **UNDER WESTERN EYES: "RICH IN RUSSIA"**

As Robert T. Tally Jr. observes in *Spatiality* (2013), "[t]he interrelations between space and writing tend to generate new places and new narratives" (46). The act of writing a place creates it anew, reflecting the feelings and impressions which the place produces in the writer who is at once a mapmaker. Simultaneously, these new stories/maps draw from the existent cartographies. This is well visible in "Rich in Russia," where Henry Bech's inner geographies collide with the Cold-War images of Soviet Russia. The story offers thus two distinct yet interlaced mappings of the Russian other: the personal and the political, respectively. The first one lends itself to a more affective reading, whereas the other will be explored in the light of Sara Ahmed's concept of *orientation*.

Bech's personal perception of Russia is to a large extent shaped by the sensual experience of the place or what philosopher Gernot Böhme terms *atmosphere*. Böhme refers to atmosphere as "the emotional tinge of space" and defines it in terms of "a typical intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object" (3). Atmospheres house tensions between the subjective, for "one must expose oneself to them, one must experience them in terms of one's own emotional state," and the objective, as they are perceived "as something 'out there,' something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power" (Böhme 3). In this sense, atmospheres are affective, as they both shape and are shaped by actors in space.

The process of mapping the Russian other starts already onboard an Aeroflot airplane heading towards Moscow. On boarding the plane, Bech is immersed in the atmosphere of the place which is the result of the interaction between what is "out there" and Bech's emotional input. The latter is related to his *emotional memory* which houses "physical feelings, moods, and other emotions" (Verbeek and van Campen 137). In a manner akin to Marcel Proust's celebrated

remembrance scene, where the protagonist is transported back in time upon tasting a madeleine cake dipped in lime tea, Bech's emotional memory is activated through sensory experience onboard the Aeroflot. Thus, the sound of spoken Russian, tangible bodily heat and the smell and taste of traditional, no-nonsense food trigger in Bech feelings of nostalgia for his long-forgotten Jewish childhood. Through "the sensual, physical experience" (Highmore 120) of flying the Russian plane, Bech is transported back to "his uncles' backrooms in Williamsburg" (Updike, *The Complete* 12), which in turn is equated with a feeling of safety and being at home.

The sensation of stepping into a separate though at once deeply familiar dimension does not vanish once the Aeroflot touches the ground. In Moscow, Bech is placed in an apartment filled with photos of Jewish intellectuals, Kafka, Freud and Wittgenstein, "pointedly evoking the glory of pre-Hitlerian *Judenkultur*" (12). This in turn causes him to meditate over his own heritage and its expression in America: the Hollywood movies of the thirties, "whereby Jewish brains projected Gentile stars upon a Gentile nation and out of their immigrant joy gave a formless land dreams and even kind of conscience" (12). By invoking "the romance between Jewish Hollywood and bohunk America," Bech seems to be reflecting upon, and perhaps also justifying, his own fiction which, like his quintessentially American novel *Travel Light*, "had sought to reach out from the ghetto of his heart towards the wider expanses across Hudson" (13). In other words, Bech's stay in Russia becomes a pretext for writerly introspection and thus one of many instances when Updike uses the character of Bech to pass a commentary on the nature and limits of authorship (Parker Royal).

"Russia seemed Jewish to him, and of course he seemed Jewish to Russia" (12). Despite the gentle irony of the last sentence (Bech is quickly informed that "two out of three Soviet intellectuals suppressed a Jew in their ancestry"), Bech experiences the atmosphere of Russia as homely and welcoming, with a "quality of life – impoverished yet ceremonial, shabby yet ornate, sentimental, embattled and avuncular" that reminds him of "his neglected Jewish past" (13). In this sense, it is not the actual space that matters to Bech, but rather its *poetics* (Bachelard), as Russia "acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning" (Said 55). As he is transported back in time to the innocence of his long-forgotten childhood, Bech revisits a pre-war

Jewish world of tradition and ritual, which Ozick would likely call simplistic and overly sentimental. By drawing a parallel between contemporary Russia and an idealised vision of traditional Jewishness, Bech endows the hetero-image of the country with positive connotations, such as virtue and generosity. However, if using past as an interpretive tool helps to domesticate the cultural other, it also removes it from the present moment, resulting in a representation which is inevitably reductionist. Consequently, Russia is fixed in the stereotype of inter-temporality; suspended between the past and the present. A similar image emerges from Updike's poetry on the subject of Russia. In "Poem for a Far Land" from 1965, Russia's liminal nature is captured in the last stanza, where the country is imagined as hovering between two temporal dimensions: "Your vastness yearns in sympathy/Between what was and that which is" (qtd. in Miller 113). Interestingly, Updike's imaginative geography of Russia is marked by paradox: the land which is mapped as gentle and feminine is at once "the breeder of stupid masculinity," which in the Cold-War context is tantamount to the oppressiveness of the system (qtd. in Miller 113).

Such a contradictory mapping is at work also in "Rich in Russia." The atmosphere that Bech steps into once he boards the Aeroflot, his passageway to Moscow, arises from "the very sensuous interface of people, places and things" (Bille et al. 37) but is also a product of his inner geographies and the cultural maps that he, as a Jewish-American writer, brings along to Russia. The resulting hetero-image of Russia blends his private memory of Jewishness, which he traces back to his family's immigrant roots, with cultural manifestations of Jewish presence in America and the image of pre-war Jewish life in Europe. In other words, Bech incorporates Russia into his geographies of home, charting a common *emotional* space that encompasses Russia and America; Moscow and New York. That said, parallel to Bech's nostalgic mapping of Russia as homely and reminiscent of his Jewish heritage, there exists a very different representation or *orientation*, traced along the political divisions of the Cold War, which echoes Updike's conviction that the distance between the East and the West cannot be breached (Miller).

The concept of orientation (Ahmed, *Queen*) provides a useful framework for discussing the other side of Bech's perception of Russia. The term shares the root word with Edward Said's *orientalism*, a large-scale enterprise involving mental maps and socio-cultural attributes which constructed, represented and consolidated



the Orient in the Western eyes, while at the same time serving to define and consolidate Western identity (Arias and Bryla n.p.). Both the Orient and orientalism imply being orientated towards the other, that is adopting a position which simultaneously reasserts the location of the self (Ahmed, *Queer* 115). To better illustrate this paradox of gazing at the other which in turn reflects back on the self, Sara Ahmed introduces a distinction between being orientated *towards* and *around* something or somebody. In reflecting upon the latter, she suggests that "to be orientated around something is what allows us to 'hold the center,' or even to constitute ourselves as at the center of other things. [...] In other words, to be orientated around something is to make 'that thing' binding, or to constitute oneself as that thing" (Ahmed, *Queer* 116). Thus, for Bech, facing Soviet Russia implies being orientated or *cohering* around America which is thus consolidated as the centre of Bech's universe and a benchmark for approaching others.

By venturing behind the Iron Curtain, Henry Bech orientates towards the European East, however, his orientation is *a priori* determined by his official role as American cultural ambassador. As the messenger of the State Department, Bech is expected to establish amicable contacts with his Russian hosts. However, his diplomatic mission has also another, less guileless purpose: he is there to promote American values and way of life and, implicitly, demonstrate the superiority of the U.S. over U.S.S.R. Bech's visit to Soviet Russia involves a complex political choreography: in the "atmosphere of generosity" (13) he is presented with expense money as well as generous "royalties" which together add up to a small Russian fortune. This sudden injection of capital which, ironically, befalls Bech in a communist society, triggers a series of satirical scenes which reveal Bech's quiet compliance with the official discourse of Soviet-American combat for supremacy and his endorsement of the corresponding clichés regarding both nations. In his travails, Bech is accompanied by a Russian interpreter called Ekaterina, who is said to embody a "schoolteacherish patience, with ageless peasant roots" (14). If Ekaterina is a national cliché, then Bech is one too: in Russia, he develops "a clowning super-American manner that disguised all complaints as 'acts'" (14). Thus, when Ekaterina, whom Bech Americanizes by calling her "Kate," advises him to deposit the money in a bank, he immediately puts on his mocking, super-American mask: "What?" said Bech, 'And help support the Socialist state? When you are already years ahead of us in the space race? I would

be adding thrust to your rockets” (15). Instead, Bech decides to approach his newly-earned wealth in a (stereo)typically American fashion: “No Kate, we must spend it! Spend, spend. It’s the Keynesian way. We will make Mother Russia a consumer society” (15). Though tongue-in-cheek, Bech’s remark reveals his orientation around America, as he maps the U.S.- U.S.S.R. relationship in terms of binary opposites of capitalism vs. communism, abundance vs. scarcity, and free choice vs. lack of possibilities. The last dichotomy is brought to the fore when Bech attempts to spend some of his rubles on a leather suitcase. The socialist department store to which Kate takes Bech reveals the economic chasm between the East and the West, yet Bech is too much of a gentleman to openly voice the latter’s superiority. Instead, it is Kate who does it for him and thus conveniently consolidates Bech’s Westward orientation: “I know what you have in the West. I have been to Science-Fiction Writers’ Congress in Vienna. This great store, and not one leather suitcase. It is a disgrace upon the people” (17).

Locked in the East-West squabble, Bech fails to transcend the stiff frames of cultural representations, which, in turn, prevents him from seeing more than meets the eye. Only at the end of the story does he realize that Kate had feelings for him and that he should have reciprocated them. In D. Quentin Miller’s reading, Bech’s failure to strike a romantic relationship with Kate demonstrates “his inability to understand both the East and Kate,” and, in a broader perspective, “a failure of Russia and America to come to terms with one another” (120). Cultural and political differences between both countries mar inter-human relations, reinforcing the Iron Curtain of clichés and preconceptions: to Bech Kate remains “locked into a colourless other dimension,” which he has no interest to explore (Updike, *The Complete* 15). Similarly, Bech’s diplomatic performance contributes little to the project of cultural mediation and mutual understanding. In fact, rather than mitigate differences, Bech’s mission seems to exacerbate them by upholding mutual preconceptions.

Bech’s journey started on the plane and ends at the Moscow airport. However, the initial affective bond with the Russian other wanes by the end of the story. It resurfaces briefly in Kate’s final kiss which, “moist and good, like a boiled potato,” echoes the sense of warm familiarity and homeliness which Russia sparked in Bech (23). However, its effect is lost on the writer, half-buried under a heavy blanket of cultural clichés and Cold-War animosities.

### INTO THE MENACING EAST: "BECH IN RUMANIA"

While Russia seemed to Bech homely and familiar, Romania baffles and disconcerts the American writer. The answer to the question why the two mappings differ so much may lie in the respective positions which Russia and Romania occupy in Bech's imaginative geographies of the Cold-War world. Given the Soviet-American struggle for world supremacy, Russia features there much more prominently, overshadowing geographically smaller and politically insignificant Romania. The fact that Romania has been Sovietized but is not Soviet means that Bech does not feel obliged to dutifully enact his part in the Soviet-American Cold-War theatre, flaunting his "super-American manner" and his "acts" for the sake of his communist hosts. In other words,

Bech feels comfortable defining himself in absolutes against Russia since its history, literature, and culture seem somewhat familiar to him. Yet he knows nothing about Romania, and he must question his definition of himself (Miller 121).

Indeed, Bech's image of Romania is rudimentary: "From his official briefing he learnt it was 'a Latin island in a Slavic sea,' that during World War II its anti-Semitism had been the most ferocious in Europe, that now it was seeking economic independence of the Soviet Bloc" (Updike, *The Complete* 30). Although Updike does not engage with the Holocaust in this story, nor does he dig into the nature of Bech's uneasiness, there are reasons to suspect that it is the subliminal fear of anti-Semitism,<sup>3</sup> which in turn conceals Bech's insecurities as a writer, that imbues his encounter with the Romanian other.

Bech's fear operates on several temporal planes, assuming the shape of "the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the non-existent, looming present as the *affective fact* of the matter" (Massumi 54). Although his fear is experienced now, it is located in the future, operating between *what is* and *what could be*. It materializes in the figure of a menacing

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<sup>3</sup> Bech's visceral fear of the Shoah is explored in "Bech in Czech," which was published two decades after Updike's first visit to Eastern Europe.

chauffeur appointed by the Party to drive the American novelist around Bucharest and take him to Brasov, the place where “Dracula hung out” (Updike, *The Complete* 26). The chauffeur’s manner is described as “nervous and remote and fussy,” and the man himself is said to embody “stupidity so severe that the mind is tensed to sustain the simplest tasks” (30). He drives the Party car like a madman, tooting the horn incessantly at every moving object, slowing and accelerating without warning, and approaching each sharp curve as if it were an adversary. Yet, in Bech’s eyes, there is more to this spectacle than just a senseless bravado. Pictured as “a short man the colour of ashes,” the chauffeur seems to embody the shabbiness and dullness of the communist hemisphere. At the same time, however, his “death-grey face” is “the face of everything foul, stale, stupid and uncontrollable in the world” (36).

The last words signal the complex nature of Bech’s fear as a “what-may-happen” scenario which, while located in the future, “is shaped by cultural histories and memories” (Ahmed, *The Cultural* 7) of Romania and, particularly, Romanian anti-Semitism, but also his deep-down angst related to his writerly ego. As in the Russian story, the encounter with the Eastern other, here embodied by the menacing driver, reminds Bech of his childhood, corroborating Joseph Benatov’s reading of Bech’s reminiscing as “a larger recurring trope of the East’s existence in a moment of the past” (45), or the stereotype of inter-temporality. This time, however, the journey into the past lacks the fragrant homeliness experienced onboard the Aeroflot. Instead, Bech recalls a humiliating and senseless fight he once had with his childhood playmate over the manner in which comic strips were replicated. The boy “his face totally closed, with a density quite inhuman,” tried to prove that some mechanical technique was used in the process by pressing Bech’s face “into the bitter grits of pebble and glass” (36). The nature of this fight and the “vision” (36) it produced are symptomatic of the broader concerns that run through the Bech saga. Bech engaged in a fight with the other boy to defend his conviction that “everything was possible for human beings, with a little training and talent” (36), yet, in the light of his present condition as a blocked writer wasting his time and creative energies on repetitive literary pageantry, this childhood belief is but an empty statement. Instead, it conveys Bech’s fear of inadequacy and his self-perception as a failed writer who “squandered his gifts” (Luscher 71) pursuing the distractions of being Henry Bech (Pinsker, “John”).

At the same time, the senseless yet uncontrollable obstinacy that Bech associates with both the menacing driver and his "childhood tormentor" (Luscher 71) are projected onto his perception of Romania as anti-Semitic. In mapping Romania, Bech filters his fears through the existing mental maps of the country. Thus, drawing on the *place myth* of Transylvania, which has been dominated by the infamous figure of Count Dracula in the Western imaginary (Light), Bech compares his Romanian driver to "the late Adolf Hitler, kept alive by Count Dracula (35). Seemingly innocuous, Bech's tongue-in-cheek remark provides some imagological food for thought. By combining two powerful tropes: a historical figure which has come to stand for the most vivid embodiment of human evil and a fictional personification of bloodthirsty monstrosity, respectively, Bech maps Romania as a half-real, half-imaginary space of danger, where "something shrugging and effete seemed to leave room for a vein of energetic evil" (37). If Russia has caused Bech to reconnect with pre-Holocaust Jewishness, in Romania he is receptive to traces of the ideology that eradicated Jewish culture. Thus, he is disconcerted when his designated Romanian companion Petrescu describes a hotel chanteuse as a "typical little Jewess," emitting a "purr Bech had not heard before" (34).<sup>4</sup> The resultant national rubric including the driver, the Nazi leader and the legendary vampire, together with Bech's sensitivity to potential traces of anti-Semitism ossify Romania in the stereotype of an obscure and fearsome place where a vein of energetic evil has been pulsating since the times of the legendary vampire Count.

Bech's four-day stay is hardly enough to get to know Romania. The Embassy's efforts to put him in contact with liberal Romanian authors result in a meeting with a party hack, Taru, which acutely exposes American ignorance of Romanian cultural situation at the time. Taru is unwilling to introduce Bech to "liberal" writers, or any Romanian writers whatsoever, claiming that most of them "are bathing at the Black Sea" at this time of the year (28). He further mocks the American writer and the Western conception of art for

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, a similar dialogue takes place in a different story, where Bech is reproached by an African-American student for using the word "Negress" to refer to one of his characters. When Bech says that he uses it "without prejudice," the student asks him how he feels about the word "Jewess," to which Bech replies: "Just as I do about 'duchess'" (Updike, *The Complete* 90-91). In the light of Bech's reaction to Petrescu's words, this response exposes volatility of Bech's ethnic identity, which seems to resurface depending on the circumstances or the place.

art's sake by feigning ignorance about Ionesco and declaring that "Western books are a luxury here, so we are not able to follow each new nihilist movement" (28).

Importantly, Bech does not confront Taru. Nor does he care about establishing any kind of cultural understanding with Romanian authors. It is only with Petrescu, the translator of American literature and the lover of Herman Melville that Bech forms something of a bond based on their common passion for literature. However, the fact that their conversations revolve solely around American literature seems to only reinforce Bech's orientation around his homeland. In other words, despite being orientated towards the other through his cultural mission, Bech keeps facing America which functions as his azimuth in alien and impenetrable Romania. In the light of John Updike's biography, there may be, however, another reason for Bech's apparent indifference to the cultural other. In D. Quentin Miller's words, "[a]s the Cold War progressed, [Updike] grew more confident in his belief that writers who don't sacrifice aesthetics for politics are preferable to those who do, regardless of their country of origin" (112). Therefore, by making Bech blatantly unconcerned with Romanian authors (and focused exclusively on American literature), Updike might be expressing his own reluctant attitude to literature written for politics' sake, with little regard to aesthetics. In this light, Bech's childhood conviction in the superiority of human talent and effort over automatized production of artefacts may perhaps be read as illustrative of Updike's rejection of literature-turned-propaganda, but also as anticipating his "disdain for fiction whose sole purpose is to criticize 'the system' at the expense of investigating basic human emotional responses and relationships" (Miller 135).

Moreover, the perfunctory cultural encounters mapped in the story seem to mock the idea of an orchestrated cultural exchange aimed at achieving political rather than cultural objectives. When Bech accidentally meets a Romanian author, he feels obliged to confront him and thus fulfill his duty as the ambassador of Western values, which he has been neglecting so far. Their brief exchange stresses the East-West dichotomy which has formed the backbone of Bech's encounter with Soviet Russia:

Bech asked him, "What do you write about?" The wife [...] translated the question, and the answer, which was brief. "Peasants," she told Bech. "He wants to know, what do you

write about?" Bech spoke to him directly. "La bourgeoisie," he said and that completed the cultural exchange (41).

As fleeting and superficial as this East-West encounter is, it fills Bech with a pleasant sense of a well-performed duty. When the Embassy man Phillips praises Bech's cultural performance, he accommodatingly compares himself to a "low-flying U2" (43). By juxtaposing Bech's anemic efforts with the image of a CIA plane used for airing missiles over the Soviet Union, Updike seems to be hinting at the ambivalence underlying USIA's cultural mission, which Richard Pells called "schizophrenic" (84), as well as the awkward position in which it places its designated spokespersons.

Not only does Bech fail to establish any kind of meaningful dialogue with the cultural other but also the representation that he (re)constructs corroborates the schematic image established at the outset of the story, casting Romania as semi-civilized and xenophobic. In this sense, Bech's appraisal of Romania seems to evoke the Western tradition of stereotyping the country as impenetrable and obscure, with Count Dracula serving as the "preferred western cultural reference point" (Deletant 226). Irony and mockery, which characterize Bech's conversations with Romanians, are his weapons against Romania's impenetrability, but even they are incapable of blotting out the sensation of fear whose source remains difficult to pinpoint but which maintains Bech in the state of constant anxiety: "He realized that for four days he had been afraid" (43). Although ultimately unrealized, the fear of some vague, though possibly anti-Semitic, threat shapes his encounter with the Romanian other to the point that on departing the country Bech feels "a vengeful sense of satisfaction and a sense of release" (42). To counterbalance the fear, he resorts to the safety of his American identity, or, as Parker Royal would argue, one of his masks: "Pardon, je ne comprends pas. Je suis Américain" confides Bech to a fellow passenger on the return plane from menacing Romania (43).

### **BEHIND THE LOOKING GLASS: "THE BULGARIAN POETESS"**

In 1915, a year after the outbreak of the Great War, American journalist John Reed visited Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, which he classified as "the Burning Balkans." The journey resulted in an almost five-hundred-page wartime report recording the impressions and insights into "that curious Slavic people whose

main business is war” (Reed n.p). Whilst Reed’s perceptions of Romania were, not unlike Bech’s, mostly negative, Bulgaria made a much more favourable impression on the journalist. No doubt it had to do with the fact the Bulgaria seemed to have a lot in common with his homeland: the capital city Sofia resembled “a bustling new city of the Pacific Northwest,” many people could speak English, while most Bulgarian politicians had been educated at an American missionary school in Constantinople (Reed 321). Interestingly, a similar pattern of othering seems to be present in “The Bulgarian Poetess,” a story which was the first fictional account written by Updike following his State-sponsored tour of “the other half of the world, the hostile, mysterious half” (Updike, *The Complete* 44). While Bech’s stay in Romania has largely confirmed the above appraisal, his initial impressions of Bulgaria seem more positive. Even though his arrival coincides with anti-American student protests, Bech is pleasantly surprised to find “the [hotel] restaurant open, the waiters affable, the eggs actual, the coffee hot, though syrupy” (45). Following this surprisingly pleasurable gustatory experience, Bech ventures outside to discover that the capital city of Bulgaria is sunny and generally agreeable, while Bulgarian women exude a faint trace of Western chic.

All these elements of Bech’s first image of Sofia; a well-functioning hotel, pretty streets and presentable women, give the place a sense of almost Western familiarity, which contrasts sharply with the gloomy backwardness of Romania. Nevertheless, even if Bulgaria is mapped as more Western and thus civilized than Romania, it still forms part of a broader rubric of Eastern Europe. There, “electricity was somewhat enchanted,” “lights flickered off untouched and radios turned themselves on,” while the telephone “rang in the dead of the night and breathed wordlessly in [Bech’s] ear” (46). Bulgaria, like the Soviet Union and Romania, appears to exist in another dimension of time and space: the trolley cars on Sofia’s streets seem to have been “salvaged from the remotest corner of Bech’s childhood” (45), whereas the claustrophobic interior of a small Christian church is compared to “the unpleasantly tight atmosphere of a children’s book” (53).

Furthermore, there is a quality of unreality to Eastern Europe and an uncanny Alice-like sensation of having crossed the looking glass: “At times, indeed, Bech felt he had passed through a mirror” (46). In fact, mirrors are mentioned at different stages of the story, implying that the reflected image may provide insight into the



way selfhood and otherness are negotiated. The mirrors which feature in "The Bulgarian Poetess" assume various shapes and serve different purposes: one is a floor-to-ceiling glass pane in front of which young ballerinas practice their intricate moves; another is a threshold through which a princess has to leap in order to meet a wizard in a ballet performance, whereas the third one is "a dingy flecked mirror" dimly reflecting the capitalist world (45). The mirror is thus not only a panel of hard glass, but also a gateway to the place where the other resides. Having crossed the liminal threshold of a mirror, Bech realizes that behind the Iron Curtain "everything was similar but left-handed" (46). Eastern Europe is a reflection of the West, yet it is not an exact image but one that is necessarily distorted, as if the dark shadow of the Iron Curtain has dimmed the colours and altered the shapes. The story, however, toys with the possibility of bridging the gap between the two sides of the looking glass through the figure of the eponymous Bulgarian poetess.

As the U.S. cultural ambassador, Bech must fulfill his mission of intercultural mediation, and this involves the usual boozy reunion with (exclusively male) members of the Writers' Union. Unexpectedly, the meeting is interrupted by the entrance of the poetess Vera Glavanakova whose appearance perceptibly alters the otherwise stale ambience of the assembly. Like in the Russian story, the encounter with the other is mapped through an olfactory experience: Vera comes in enveloped in "the rosy air of a woman fresh from a bath," and the freshness she ushers promises to mollify the solidity of preconceptions and bridge the divide between the East and the West. More than a sexual attraction, there is something transcendental to Henry Bech and Vera Glavanakova's meeting. Although she speaks only limited English, they seem to understand each other, and Bech feels, instinctually, that he has at last encountered the "central woman" of his life (51).<sup>5</sup>

At one point in the story Bech and Glavanakova have a conversation about literature during which she mentions the work of French novelist Nathalie Sarraute and her theory of "the little

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<sup>5</sup> As Ward Briggs and Biljana Dojčinović demonstrate, Updike's painterly portrayal of Vera, with its emphasis on the light, the colour, and the scent, is reminiscent of the image of Venus in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Accordingly, Vera's status as the "central woman" seems to allude to Venus's/Aphrodite's centrality in ancient cultures (Briggs and Dojčinović 11).

*movements within the heart*" (56). Vera must be referring to *tropisms*, which Sarraute described as "inward instinctive movements towards something that stimulates them. [...] [L]ike a plant turning to the sun, or a primitive being that is pulled—without knowing what is happening to it, towards certain objects" ("Nathalie" 12-13). Words pronounced by someone or objects seen may provoke tropisms which are placed in motion without our will, instinctively. Sarraute's idea seems to be akin to affect understood in terms of "force of encounter" that "transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities" (Seigworth and Gregg 2). Outwardly there is nothing spectacular about Bech and Vera's meeting, yet the little movements within the heart that transpire between them are forceful enough to, at least for a moment, melt the hard surface of the (iron) mirror that divides them.<sup>6</sup> As Robert M. Luscher observed, "[w]hile Bech may seem more of a hollow shell in the previous two stories, in 'The Bulgarian Poetess' the reader becomes aware of the artist and seeker who has retreated behind the post of weariness and irony after his artistic powers decline" (71). Indeed, out of the three stories discussed here "The Bulgarian Poetess" seems to be the most poetic, as if Updike's has momentarily forgone Bech's customary wry humor for the sake of a more tender and nuanced vision. The affective change that has taken place within Bech leads to the most authentic and heartfelt cultural dialogue so far, unmarred by diplomatic obligations and political tensions. Moved by "a romantic vertigo" (51), Bech tells Vera about the way he writes, or wrote before he had lost the ability to produce new work. In doing so, he finally achieves what he has not been able to do so far: reach a deep understanding with the cultural other.

There is an interesting real-life precedent for Bech and Vera's affective connection. Vera was modelled after Bulgarian poet Blaga Dimitrova, who made a strong impression on Updike. Much like Bech, Updike was taken not only with Blaga's radiant looks, but also "her concentration on the personal rather than the collective, and her eschewal of approved political topics" (Briggs and Dojčinović 12). Indeed, Vera's interest in Sarraute and the intimate character of her poetry suggest a sensibility that goes beyond the pre-programmed

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<sup>6</sup> The image of the Iron Curtain transforming into a mirror is explored by D. Quentin Miller in his analysis of "The Bulgarian Poetess" (206), while the idea of an "iron mirror" is captured in Joseph Benatov's dissertation: *Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958-2001* (2008).

tenets of politically-minded literature. Seen in this light, the affective connection between Bech and Vera reveals a persistent intertwining of emotions and politics, characteristic of all the stories discussed in this essay. As it seems, only when aesthetic sensibilities of Bech/Updike and the cultural other align is understanding possible.

Yet the spell is soon broken when Petrov, Bech's guide in Sofia, declares that in Bulgaria, given its unhappy history, there is no place for such sentimental fiction as Bech's American writing. The remark is sufficient to bring back old antagonisms: "If there was one thing that irked Bech about these people behind the mirror, it was their assumption, that, however second-rate elsewhere, in suffering they were supreme" (57). Interestingly, Bech's refusal to divide people into those who suffer (Eastern Europe) and those who do not (America) does not prevent him from essentializing the latter and thus reconstituting the mental Iron Curtain, which has temporarily dissolved between him and Vera. Although Bech makes sure that Vera is invited to his farewell party at the American embassy, he fails to reach her both physically and metaphorically as he becomes "surrounded by America: the voices, the narrow suits, the watery drinks, the clatter, the glitter" (59).

Towards the end of the story Updike returns to the liminal metaphor of the looking glass. This time, however, it conveys a sense of a lost opportunity: "[t]he mirror had gone opaque and gave him back only himself" (59). Bech's final words to Vera poignantly express the impossibility of a romantic relationship and, in a broader perspective, a lasting transcultural connection. The poetess, and the world she belongs to, remain locked up behind the (iron) mirror, and Bech's tender feelings are not sufficient to melt the hard surface. In fact, Bech does nothing to keep Vera by his side, for he realizes that the two halves cannot be reconciled:

Dear Vera Glavanakova –

It is a matter of earnest regret for me that you and I must live on opposite sides of the world (59).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In "On Not Being a Dove" (1989), John Updike briefly recalls his stay behind the Iron Curtain. While he admits that he has much sympathy for the people he met there, he also makes it clear that the visit confirmed his belief that America was "the distinctly better

mousetrap” (n.p.). Speaking about his Soviet friends, Updike compares them to “residents of a planet so heavy that even their gazes were sucked back into its dark centre” (“On Not,” n.p.) Whatever affinities the inhabitants of each side of the bipolar universe may share, the political galaxies they belong to are so diverse that they ultimately preclude a lasting understanding. To return to Ahmed’s concept, Updike’s orientation towards the East thus reflects back on his orientation *around* America whose identity is consolidated and even reinforced through the encounter with the other.

Unlike Bech, Updike lacks the ethnic and cultural connection to the European East which allows his protagonist to venture beyond the diplomatic script of his American cultural mission. Bech’s Jewishness seems to be one of the reasons why the East-West encounters mapped in the stories seem to offer a less definitive assessment of the Cold-War divide, at least in “Rich in Russia,” where the geographical passage is at once a sentimental journey into Bech’s neglected heritage. In contrast, in “Bech in Rumania” Bech’s Jewishness is capitalized on to exacerbate an already bleak image of the country. Bech’s ethnicity thus functions as a link to the European East, but also a narrative vehicle allowing Updike to achieve a desired imagological effect.

Interestingly, in all the stories, there exists a persistent connection between Bech’s infancy and the places he visits, as if by travelling through post-war Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Bech travelled also back into his own past; “the remotest corner” of himself. As a result, the foreign space becomes removed from the present moment and frozen in time, like an old-fashioned sepia photograph or a dated movie that has been stopped midway—an image which is as visually gripping as it is reductionist.

In “Rich in Russia” and “The Bulgarian Poetess” glimpses of affect shine through the rigid Cold-War divides as Bech reconnects with his past in Moscow and meets his soulmate, Vera the poetess, in Sofia. This last encounter is particularly important as it disrupts the masculinized geographies of the Cold-War cultural diplomacy: the man-to-man literary reunions and embassy briefings where women are relegated to the background, like Bech’s Russian translator Kate, who is little more than an accessory and a national cliché in Bech’s eyes. To the contrary, Vera, who is poised and complete, defies easy national rubrics which Bech has employed to classify the places he has visited and the people he has met during

his diplomatic tour. If only for a moment, the connection between Bech and Vera promises that, when tropisms; the little movements within the heart, are at work one may truly turn towards the other and see them for what they are, rather than just the reflection of oneself. But it is a cold (war) world after all, and whatever there is between the two authors is tamed and rationalized by the narrative of incompatibility: the two sides cannot be reconciled and nothing can be done about it.

In the three stories, emotions, let us call them nostalgia, fear and affection, respectively, complicate the binary logic of the self and other, the West and the East. They arise from interactions or "intensities" that pass between people and people, and people and places. There is vividness and potentiality to these encounters, yet they are marred by the heavy load of irony and preconceived notions of what the other half of the world is like. Ultimately, the affective intensities dramatised in the stories become subsumed under the existing maps of the European East: the mirror goes opaque and the smooth iron surface reflects only Henry Bech: his fears, desires and longings.

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