Authenticity and Autofiction: John Updike's "The Bulgarian Poetess"

ALEXANDRA K. GLAVANAKOVA
Sofia University, St. Kliment Ohridski

> Dear Vera Glavanakova—
>
> It is a matter of earnest regret for me that you and I must live on opposite sides of the world.
>
> –– John Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess" (1965)

> On the one side are the truths of fact, on the other the truth of the writer's feeling, and where the two coincide cannot be decided by any outside authority in advance.
>
> –– Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960)

The inspiration for this paper is as much academic as it is personal, for it comes from the reference to my own surname, Glavanakova, in the short story "The Bulgarian Poetess" by John Updike. First published in *The New Yorker* on March 13, 1965, the story builds on his four-day stay in Bulgaria the previous year.[1] Updike played the role of an official American "cultural ambassador" during a six-week visit in 1964 to, in the words of the character in the story: "Moscow and Kiev, Yerevan and Alma Ata, Bucharest and Prague,"[2] and Sofia, as part of a cultural exchange program between the United States, the Soviet Union, and other countries of Eastern Europe. Updike first conceived of the character of Bech following this State Department mission. He foregrounds the autobiographical origin of these stories: "When I returned from the Soviet Union and

Eastern Europe in '64 I had a number of *impressions* that only a writer could have collected. So, in trying to utilize some of them I invented Henry Bech, just *to serve as a vehicle for my own impressions* in a story entitled 'The Bulgarian Poetess.'"[3] [4]

The "The Bulgarian Poetess" has been analyzed within the framework of the Cold War by Quentin Miller[5] and Joseph Benatov[6] with a special focus on Eastern Europe in the American imaginary. Notably, the story reveals how Eastern Europe has functioned as "a generative transnational space in the production of American culture,"[7] by underscoring the inextricable connection "between the domestic and the foreign, between 'at home' and 'abroad.'"[8] For other researchers, delving into the text meant also looking for a detailed and, more significantly, an *authentic* reconstruction of events, places, and people appearing in the story in order to establish the cases of factual distortion.[9] Ward Briggs and Biljana Dojčinović (2015) have produced the most exhaustive exploration of the fact–fiction connection in the story to date. [10]

The reading offered here focuses on the interplay between authenticity and artifice through the lens of autofiction by way of illustrating how one culture translates into another, suggested by Updike's own words in "The Bulgarian Poetess" that are quoted as the first epigraph to this article. His alter-ego, Bech, inscribes these words in the book he gives as a gift to the Bulgarian poetess, and they are a close rendition of the actual words Updike wrote in the copy of *The Centaur* he gave to the real poetess, Blaga Dimitrova.[11] The perspective of autofiction applied to interpreting the story opens ample spaces for discussions of identity and self-reflexivity in a transcultural context, inviting transnational readings of East and/versus West.

Alongside Updike's "impressions" of Bulgaria gathered at the time and reflected in the story, there are also the *impressions* about the author as an American, which are examined here. Such impressions were recorded in publications by the first translator of his works into Bulgarian, who met Updike in person during the 1964 visit. Other views on Updike and his relationship with the Bulgarian poetess have appeared in more recent publications in the country following the rather belated publication of the short story's translation into the Bulgarian language—as late as 2004, thirty-nine years after it first appeared in *The New Yorker*.[12] Ultimately, Updike's use of my own surname, not a common Slavic one, which he chose for the fictional character of the Bulgarian poetess, provoked me to look back at myself through the mirror of his text. By looking for the answer to the question "What's in a name?" posited by Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, I discovered a point of confluence between Updike's autofictional writing and my own family history.

Autofiction

Autobiographical writing relies on a subject who can remember, interpret, and identify with his or her life story. However, in the posthuman age there has been an ongoing deconstruction of auto-bio-graphy related to the ongoing undoing of the humanist foundations of self-identity.[13] As the life-forms of subjectivity proliferate among animals, humans and intelligent machines, the genre of autobiography becomes more and more fragmented, while at the same time the boundaries between autofiction, life writing, and memoir grow more amorphous. What distinguishes autofiction as a separate mode of writing for some critics is defined by the fact that the writer "has a pact with him/herself, which is not to lie, not to invent just for the sake of fiction, but to be as honest as possible [...] in his/her quest for truth."[14] But does this commitment to honesty refer to the "truth of fact" or to "the truth of the writer's feeling," as referred to in the second epigraph to this article from Roy Pascal's classic text *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960)?[15] "The truth of fact" in autofiction is verifiable; "the truth of feeling" is beyond validation, which does not undermine the authenticity of the emotions rendered in writing.

Recent debates have focused on the origin of the term autofiction, in particular its French genealogy, which has been posited against (or alongside) the Anglophone one as evidenced in publications by Hywel Dix and Myra Bloom.[16] According to Bloom, who discusses the origin of the term from a historical perspective, its first usage was anglophone: Paul West used it in 1972 in a *New York Times* review of Richard Elman's *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids* by referring to the book as a "hybrid autofiction about coming of age in Jewish Brooklyn."[17] Marjorie Worthington adds another perspective to this argument, claiming that the autofictional trope has become extremely common in American fiction.[18] She perceives its rise in post-WWII postmodern American fiction as an outcome of the "death of the author" threat and the anxieties surrounding the undermining of white masculinity in the context of the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s. Worthington interprets the "purposeful elision between the author and the author–character"[19] as a further foregrounding of the impossibility of distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction.

Serge Doubrovsky, though no longer credited as being the first who used it, provided a description of autofiction on the back cover of his novel *Fils* (1977) that gets quoted most often: "Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language."[20] Doubrovsky's view on the differences between autobiography and autofiction has been debated by literary critics, journalists, and authors in France and elsewhere over the past four decades. Criticizing Doubrovsky's assertion that autobiography is "a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives,"[21] some have questioned whether autofiction is in fact different from autobiography.

For others, autofiction, in contradistinction to autobiography, "generates an ambiguous reading pact," vacillating between a referential–autobiographical one and a more fictional one.[22] Gerard Genette also underscores this interweaving, claiming that "true autofiction is authentically *fictional*,"[23] for it collapses the distance between the fictional and the mimetic. Alison Gibbons, too, expresses the view that autofiction is "an explicitly hybrid form of life writing that merges autobiographical fact with fiction," adding that "[t]he autofictional mode is not restricted to writing; it has been observed in the visual arts, cinema, theatre and online."[24] Since Updike makes a point of distancing himself from his character, his claim in effect underscores the blending of fact and fiction in "The Bulgarian Poetess": "I made Bech as unlike myself as I could. Instead of being married with four children, he's a bachelor; instead of being a Gentile, he's a Jew."[25] The latitude in the representation of facts is related to the main role of autofiction, which is "to create reality effects that better capture the complexity of the subject's inner and outer worlds," regardless of how much a text is grounded in the factual.[26] In addition, the constitutive "auto" in autofiction may be indicative of a certain degree of reflexive narcissism in this mode of writing.[27] The title of Bloom's critical text clearly emphasizes the connectedness between the presumed exposure of a self in autofiction and the practice of the selfie as private lives go public in the digital age.

For Worthington, there are additional important qualities for autofiction in American literature in particular. For her, "[t]he primary defining trait of autofiction […] is the inclusion of a characterized version of the author, usually as the protagonist."[28] Moreover, the distinctive common feature she finds in the American autofiction she analyzes, written by men, is that the character shares his or her name with the author.[29] However, Updike does not employ this particular technique, as Worthington points out. There are "no overt metafictional gestures outside [. . .] to the extratextual world. Even though some Updike novels may contain characters that resemble him, these characters are not overtly connected to him and, therefore, he is not directly implicated in their exploits."[30] Similarly, an explicit verbalized connection is not made between Updike and his character in "The Bulgarian Poetess." The conflation of writer, narrator, and protagonist remains implicit and is there for the reader to decipher.[31]

Autofiction could be seen as forming a semantic network with related writing practices such as *faction,* represented by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), or with contemporary writer's fictional re-workings of autobiographical episodes as in Amelie Nothomb's *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999), or Hitomi Kanehara's *Ōto fikushon* (2006), and especially with Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård's six autobiographical novels of more than thirty-five hundred pages, titled, with a throwback to Hitler, *Min Kamp* (2009–2011).[32] I refer here to Knausgård precisely because his work reflects the irresoluble conflict between objectivity and subjectivity in writing where the author offers fragments of his or her own self by drawing a very thin line between memoir, autobiographical writing, and autofiction. For "if the self is a narrative, it is only one of many versions," states Knausgård in an interview.[33] He claims that "memories make up our own narrative—maybe the most important part of our identity," and that "the string of memories keeps it [our identity] together—and repression and forgetfulness keep the string of memories clean—non-contradictory and manageable."[34] This reference to the propensity towards forgetting and repressing memories echoes the description Bech provides of the Bulgarian poetess of an essay he wrote on "'orgasm as perfect memory. The one mystery is, what are we remembering?' She shook her head again, and he noticed that her eyes were gray, and that in their depths his image (which he could not see) was searching for the thing remembered."[35] Employing the trope of elusive self-/reflexivity, which dominates the story, Updike weaves memory of fact with memory of feeling, identity with othering.

Othering: Dancing Through the Mirror

It is not incidental that Updike's story about the East of the West has been read as travel literature, which is above all a genre involving an exploration of self through others. Stefan Herbrechter formulates the mechanism of othering in self-construction: "This other is an unknowable who has the structure of a trace: a 'non-present' presence that can never be made present as such because it is always deferred and thus always differs from itself, like a trace. This other always precedes and gives rise to the subject's impression of self-presence and identity."[36] East–West othering has been historically situated and with variable coordinates. For Eva Hoffman, for example, who was forcibly exiled from socialist Eastern Europe, her place of birth—constructed in contrast to Canada, where her family settled—remained for her "an idealized landscape of the mind,"[37] though the opposite has often been true for others in exile in their perception of Eastern Europe.[38] "Our psyches," she explains, "seem to be so constructed that we need and desire an imagined "other"—either a glimmering, craved, idealized other, or an other that is dark, savage, and threatening. Eastern Europe has served our needs in this respect very well."[39] On arrival, Bech's/Updike's impressions of socialist Bulgaria are in line with the negative othering of Eastern Eurpope, as evidenced in his character's observation that "[w]ords like 'progressive' and 'liberal' had a somewhat reversed sense in this world."[40] However, alongside this familiar representation of Eastern Europe another perspective emerges: socialist and capitalist regimes come to be perceived not only as contrasting but also as mirror images of each other.

In his illustration how one culture translates into another "at the opposite side[s] of the world,"[41] Updike becomes aware both of seeing oneself as other and of crossing the boundaries of otherness during his visit to Sofia. The Iron Curtain as the trope for division is superseded in the story by the pervasive imagery of the mirror, implying both the reflection and the doubling of self.[42] The significance of the mirror is such that, as Updike notes, the provisional title for the story was "Through the Looking Glass."[43] Mirrors dominate the scene at a ballet performance in Sofia Updike is invited to, (appearing also in a description of the floor-to-ceiling mirror at the Moscow ballet school he visited earlier on his trip): as the ballerina would have another dancer emerge from the wings "to perform as her reflection"; she would "dance toward the mirror," "leap through the oval of gold wire," and ultimately dance "through the mirror."[44] The mirroring device employed by Updike can be further linked intertextually to Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "Roger Malvin's Burial" and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which are duly mentioned in "The Bulgarian Poetess."[45]

Bech's experience in Sofia makes him aware of a basic similarity between East and West in the common suffering, the unhappy history, and the quest for an authentic self, for "[i]f 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."[46] Eventually he comes to perceive the apparent cultural and ideological East–West barrier as "a dingy flecked mirror that reflected feebly the capitalist world; in its dim depths everything was similar but left-handed"[47]—a statement that echoes Vaclav Havel's view of socialist Eastern Europe as the West's distorted self-image. Totalitarian systems, in Vaclav's words, are "a convex mirror of all modern civilization and a harsh, perhaps final call for a global recasting of that civilization's self-understanding."[48] More specifically, he goes on to explain, totalitarian systems are "a convex mirror of the inevitable consequences of rationalism, a grotesquely magnified image of its own deep tendencies, an extreme outcropping of its own development and an ominous product of its expansion. They are a deeply informative reflection of its own crisis."[49] However, at times this eradication of othering is lost for the protagonist of the story. For example, at the cocktail party at the end of his visit to Bulgaria, Bech finds himself "surrounded by America: the voices, the narrow suits, the watery drinks, the chatter, the glitter. The mirror had gone opaque and gave him back only himself."[50]

It is in the reversed cultural space of Eastern Europe that Updike's protagonist interacts with "these people behind the mirror" at the protocol meetings taking place around "polished oval tables," under "the lurking portrait of Lenin."[51] One such meeting takes place in the building of the Union of Bulgarian Writers following the established conventions of the times, where he finds himself in the company of several Bulgarian "literary officials, termed 'critics'" and "a few selected novelists and poets."[52] It is here that Updike meets Blaga Dimitrova.[53]

Among those present at the meeting are the chair of the English Department at Sofia University, "speaking in a beautiful withered English of Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis" and the "maverick" Bulgarian translator of American fiction.[54] It has been established by Briggs and Dojčinović that this was Krastan Dyankov, who would go on to translate *The Centaur* and other novels by Updike.[55] *The Centaur* came out in 1967. Years later Dyankov would confess, "[t]he most difficult book I translated was *The Centaur* by John Updike, and I cannot tell you why. Perhaps it was his style, that New England style."[56] Dyankov shared a revelation he made after meeting the writer in person, which was prior to the meeting at the Writers' Union. In the afterword to his translation of *The Centaur*, he describes his first *impression* of Updike. Dyankov came across the writer in a hotel lobby by chance and immediately recognized who the man was, though he had never seen Updike before. Dyankov approached the American, who was surprised at being so quickly and unmistakably identified, as Updike was yet to achieve his international fame and was largely unfamiliar in this part of the world. As Dyankov writes, Updike's appearance corresponded precisely to the image the translator had formed in his mind about the writer from reading his book. Still under the vivid impression of *The Centaur*, Dyankov was "assured that Updike looks and talks exactly like his prose."[57] The translator's testimony to the extraordinary correspondence between the actual author and his writing serves as an indirect illustration of Updike's notorious propensity for the autofictional in his writing.

The Bulgarian Reception of the Short Story

Within the discussion of how othering reflects self-perception, the question why it took so long to translate the story into Bulgarian has a special relevance. Critics have pointed out that the reasons for this could be ideological and such an explanation seems logical within the political context of socialism. However, Updike's other fiction was widely translated during the same period; this particular short story was an exception. Following the collapse of socialism in the years post-1989, oddly enough the story was not translated until, finally, 2004. On the matter of the belated translation, one commentator observed that after the story's original publication in English in 1965,

> [o]fficials must have been disappointed with this [Updike's] "non-progressive" representation of the Bulgarian social reality. The ones who recognized themselves in the story as participants in the meeting also could not have been satisfied. Updike understood this and this explains his inclusion in the team, which translated the most complete for the times *Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry*, compiled and published by William Meredith, a great friend of our literature.[58]

The rather unflattering portrayal of some of the literary dignitaries who were present at the meeting with Updike could indeed provide a possible answer. Should they have recognized themselves in the fictional characters of the story as twisted caricatures within the absurdities of socialist reality, it would have been highly displeasing for them to have such a text, rendered in Updike's subversive, subtly ironic tone, read by their fellow Bulgarians.

It was only after Updike's death that a public discussion ensued in Bulgaria on issues of authenticity, historical validity, and the reception of "The Bulgarian Poetess," alongside the soul-searching regarding the nontranslation of the story for so many years. According to one Bulgarian critic the delay in the translation serves as a "dramatic example of [Bulgarian] self-marginalization and provincialization."[59] Another critic finds that "Updike's literary emergence in Bulgaria can only be discussed through his own distant contextuality," for he is incomparable to anything or anybody local.[60] These approaches indicate that the American writer has been perceived then and even now as the very incarnation of otherness. Updike can only be identical to himself, and to his prose.

Once the story was finally available to Bulgarian readers, it was not read as fiction, but rather as a travelogue, or even reportage, thus foregrounding what is considered by the majority of its readers to be the true-to-fact rendition of people and events in the text.[61] Based on the reception of the story as reflected in media publications, Bodakov concludes that "in the tension between facts and fiction, fiction is debunked and removed. The story's meaning is drastically reduced. All that remains are the facts … And the gossip."[62] This reductionist approach in pursuit of the ultimate answer to the questions: "Did he fall in love with the poetess? Did she respond in kind?" is what reading the story as autofiction offered here aims to overcome.

Briggs and Dojčinović start their attempt at reconstructing the people, places, and events in the story with the claim that it "might seem to be straight reportage."[63] However, in the conclusion of their analysis, Briggs and Dojčinović modify their initial claim: "For his characters Updike selected such telling physical details for each that their real-life counterparts were immediately recognizable when the story appeared in Bulgaria.… [Y]et his portrayal of Blaga Dimitrova as a confident secure poet do[es] not comport with reality, but work[s] perfectly for the characters represented in the story."[64] Indeed, Bech finds in the Bulgarian poetess, named Vera Glavanakova in the story, "the closest approximation" to "an undisclosed prototype": the "central woman."[65] The poetess is portrayed as "a woman needing nothing […] complete, poised, satisfied, achieved,"[66] and Bech is drawn to the "intense conjunction of good looks and brains"[67] he discovers in her. But what truly surprises him is that he encounters her "in this remote and bullied nation."[68]

Authenticity

An important allusion to the permeative blending of fact and fiction—the definitive trait of autofiction—is the narrator's own statement in the opening lines of the story that "his search for plain truth carried him farther and farther into treacherous realms of fantasy."[69] Thus he questions his own reliability as narrator in rendering the facts truthfully and, by using cognates associated with truth, Updike emphasizes its problematic nature. For instance, Bech is disarmed on first meeting the poetess by "her unexpected quality of truth."[70] When her poetry is described as "shallow," Bech responds that "shallowness can be a kind of honesty."[71] A short discussion takes place in a similar vein at the meeting around the oval table about Bech's first novel: "the famous one," entitled *Travel Light*, which is described by the chairman of the Writer's Union as "so *American*, the youth, the adoration for space and speed, the barbarity of advertisements in neon lightning, the very poetry"; it is a novel that has "truth, wonder, terror even, vulgarity."[72] Its distinctive Americanness, alongside its truthfulness are underlined here, setting Updike in a category of his own.

Another nuance to the fluid authenticity of events described in the story is added by the first name the poetess is given by Updike—a point emphasized by Briggs and Dojčinović in their analysis. Vera is linked to *vyara* [faith] and its cognate *veren*, which can be translated both as "faithful" and "truthful." In line with the query whether the narrative authentically reproduces actual events, critics have tried to establish why Updike chose the surname Glavanakova for the poetess's maiden name. This question has led me on a personal quest.

One of my grandfather's nephews used to work for many years in the library on the ground floor of the American Legation in Sofia. It is from the windowsill of this library that Bech picks up a copy of Hawthorne's short stories, which he reads later in his hotel room. This relative of mine must have been in his late twenties at the time of Updike's visit. On the scale of probability, it is more than a simple conjecture to suggest that Updike could have met or at the very least heard the name of my relative spoken during his visit to the Legation and since it is quite an unusual name, unlike Petrov, a more common one used in the story, the writer probably decided to use it for his extraordinary female character—the "central woman."

It is important that I explain the etymology of the name Glavanakova and explore how it relates to my own family history. It derives from the noun *glava*, which originates from the Proto-Balto-Slavic **galwāˀ*, possibly related to the Old High German *kalo* (bald) and to the Latin *calva* (skull).[73] Cognates of the word meaning "head" abound in Slavic and Baltic languages, including the Old Church Slavonic *glava*. The derivative adjective *glaven*, to be found in Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, and Russian, means "main, principal." I suppose it is from here that James Schiff derived the meaning "the very important one" to be found in his analysis of the story.[74] The root of the name, however, could also be derived from the word *glavanak*, which according to *The Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language* denotes in one of its meanings "a person with a large head, but not very clever."[75] This meaning, recorded as late as 1936, seems to be the source that Briggs and Dojčinović consulted in their analysis of the short story in reference to the meaning of the name, which they interpret only in the sense of a "stubborn or silly person," and not meaning "the very important one."[76]

However, my grandfather had an entirely different interpretation of the family name from the ones recorded in dictionaries and supplied by the interpreters of the story. He always insisted that it meant a tenacious, persevering, and determined person. I believe that could be a very apt description of his nature, forged by a difficult life that spanned the entire twentieth century. He was born in its first decade in a small town in the southeastern part of Bulgaria. His family of eight siblings—one sister and seven brothers—was extremely poor. Having taught himself French, he enrolled for one semester at the Sorbonne in Paris to study law, paying for his own tuition, but almost died of cold and starvation during the winter months. He returned to the home country defeated and heartbroken only in time for the funeral of his only sister, Sofia, gone at nineteen from tuberculosis.

Eventually, my grandfather went on to graduate in law from Sofia University, established his own law firm, and married well. Meanwhile he briefly toyed with anarchist ideas in the early 1940s, eventually embraced the ideas of communism, harbored

Resistance fighters—communist partisans fighting against fascism during World War II—and fought on the side of the Resistance movement. He joined the Bulgarian Communist Party at that time, firmly believing in its potential to bring on a better future. After the coup d'état in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944, which established a communist regime, following the break with fascist Germany, and the following invasion by the Red Army, he became a public prosecutor for the Nineth People's Court [Naroden Sad] (1944–1945), only to discover quite soon the repressive and murderous purposes of that court. The People's Court started out with the goal to punish war criminals but ended up destroying a large part of Bulgaria's political, military, and intellectual elite. He attempted to dissociate himself from its lawless acts. Instead of looking for incriminating evidence for the accused, my grandfather tried to find exonerating evidence to help show that they were free of blame and should be released. This led to his being expelled from the Party in 1946, but mercifully he was not relocated or sent to a camp. He was perceived as a renegade by the Party and was forced into an early retirement so as not to be able to practice law.

It is common knowledge that a disillusioned idealist makes for the bitterest misanthrope. It really does take great resilience to keep trying to help others and stay in love with nature and life as my grandfather did till his ninety-first year. I cannot even begin to imagine the moral dilemmas he was forced to face and all the social and familial complications they must have caused him. No doubt, his nephew, who worked at the library of the American Legation in Sofia, and my grandfather, the ex-member of the Bulgarian Communist Party and prosecutor of the reviled People's Court, though literally occupying the same country, were metaphorically living on opposite sides. My grandfather refused to write his memoir, as I repeatedly asked him. Even if he had, I often wonder, how much of it would have been fact, and how much fiction? Would he have attempted to express the truth of fact or the truth of feeling?

Examining "The Bulgarian Poetess" from the perspective of autofiction reveals the complex synergy between factual memory and reflective emotion in writing about *a* life. As Dix points out, "[s]uch complication renders assumptions of truth and authenticity simplistic and in the last instance untenable."[77] As Updike accurately points out in the story, "[a]ctuality is a running impoverishment of possibility."[78] Considered from the perspective of autofiction, which insists on the interplay between the real and the imaginary, the "truth" of Updike's falling in love with Dimitrova, or vice versa, does not need to be established. Its validity is beside the point. The "romantic vertigo"[79] experienced by the narrator in "The Bulgarian Poetess" partakes of the seemingly radical difference and incommensurability between the two worlds, which he rather stereotypically perceives at the start, but eventually, and paradoxically, recognizes as sameness. Indeed, just as Vera becomes a mirror for the self-observation of the writer–narrator in the story, and the East is recognized as a mirror of the West, so has Updike's "The Bulgarian Poetess" become a mirror for myself and my private hi/story in this article written in the autofictive mode.

Notes

[1] The story was published just four months after Updike returned to the US, according to Ward Briggs and Biljana Dojčinovič, "The Bulgarian Poetess: John and Blaga," *The John Updike Review* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 28. It was subsequently republished with some minor revisions in John Updike, *The Music School: Short Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1966) and John Updike, *Bech: A Book* (New York: Knopf, 1970). It was the only Bech story Updike included in *The Early Stories 1953–1975* (John Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," in *The Early Stories 1953–1975*, [New York: Knopf, 1983], 737–50). The revisions have been analyzed in detail by Briggs and Dojčinović. The quotations from the story in this article are from the last version of the story, reprinted in a new edition of *The Early Stories* in 2003.

[2] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 739.

[3] John Updike, *Picked-up Pieces* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Books, 1975), 505; emphasis added.

[4] Human Chronionic Gondatropin (HCG) is a pregnancy hormone that has cycled in and out of diet fad favor in the 50s, 80s, and early 2000s. The diet requires patients to inject themselves five times a week every two weeks with HCG while maintaining a 500-calorie starvation diet under the watch of licensed medical professionals. There is a ritual of bi-weekly weigh-ins, educational resources on how best to incorporate low-impact exercises and nurses hawking nutritional supplements. Major health risks—such as organ failure—are often underemphasized as patients witness rapid weight-loss within the first two weeks, only to plateau within a month and later regain the lost pounds once returning to a normal diet.

[5] Quentin Miller, *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

[6] Joseph Benatov, "Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958–2001" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

[7] Benatov, "Looking in the Iron Mirror," iv.

[8] Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1.

[9] See James Schiff, *John Updike Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1998); Alexander Shurbanov, "Progeny of Orpheus," Introd. to *Scars* [Belezi] by Blaga Dimitrova, trans. Ludmilla G. Popova-Wightman (Princeton, NJ: Ivy Press, 2002), 15–21; Vesela Katsarova, Moyata rodina e tseliyat svyat: Zhenite v bulgarskata i anglo-amerikanskata literatura [My country is the whole world: Women in Bulgarian and Anglo-American literature] (Sofia, BG: Polis, 2010); Yordan Kosturkov, *Tainiyat zhivot na velikite amerikanski pisateli: Literaturni portreti* [The secret lives of the great American writers:

Literary portraits] (Plovdiv, BG: Hermes, 2012); and Briggs and Dojčinović, "The Bulgarian Poetess: John and Blaga," 1–36.

[10] Briggs and Dojčinović, "The Bulgarian Poetess: John and Blaga."

[11] Briggs and Dojčinović, "The Bulgarian Poetess: John and Blaga," 24.

[12] Yordan Kosturkov, "Bulgarskata poetesa" [The Bulgarian poetess], by John Updike *Maritsa,* (Dec. 2004): 18–21. Kosturkov's translation appeared in 2004 but most readers and critics are more familiar with the 2007 translation that appeared in *Panorama* vol. 3 (2007), , the official journal of the Union of Bulgarian Translators since 1980.

[13] For more on this see Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism–A Critical Analysis*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Stefan Herbrechter, *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality*, (Leiden, NL: Brill, Critical Posthumanisms, 3, 2021); and Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, Theory in the New Humanities, 2019).

[14] Catherine Cusset, "The Limits of Autofiction," (unpublished conference paper, 2012) http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/the-limits-of-autofiction.pdf, no pagination.

[15] Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[16] See Hywel Dix, "Autofiction: The Forgotten Face of French Theory," *Word and Text. A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 7, no. 1 (2017): 69–85, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/141468984.pdf; Hywel Dix, ed., *Autofiction in English* (Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018), in particular the chapter in this volume by Karen Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?," in *Autofiction in English*, ed. Hywel Dix (Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 27–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89902-2_2; Myra Bloom, "Sources of the Self(ie): An Introduction to the Study of Autofiction in English," *English Studies in Canada* 45, no. 1 (2019): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2019.0000.

[17] Qtd. in Bloom, "Sources of the Self(ie): 4.

[18] Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 2.

[19] Worthington, *The Story of "Me,"* 1–2.

[20] Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), 10. In French, "Fils" mean "son" if the speaker pronounces the "s," but "threads" if the "s" is silent.

[21] Doubrovsky, *Fils*, 10.

[22] Marileen La Haije, "Narration and Madness: Schizophrenia, Paranoia and Autofiction in Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*," *Confluencia* 32, no. 2 (2017): 146, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26529320.

[23] Gerard Genette, *Fiction & Diction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 77, emphasis original.

[24] Alison Gibbons, "Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect," in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 120.

[25] Updike, *Picked-up,* 505.

[26] Bloom, "Sources of the Self(ie)," 8.

[27] This perspective on autofiction will inevitably bring to mind Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980).

[28] Worthington, *The Story of "Me,"* 2.

[29] Worthington, *The Story of "Me,"*1.

[30] Worthington, *The Story of "Me,"* 50. Among the writers Worthington analyzes one can find Philip Roth, Kurt Vonnegut, Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, Tim O'Brien, Raymond Federman, and others.

[31] Bloom, "Sources of the Self(ie)," 5.

[32] Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (New York: Random House, 1966); Amélie Nothomb, *Stupeur et tremblements* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999); Hitomi Kanehara, *Ōto fikushon* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2006); and Karl Ove Knausgård, *Min kamp*, 6 vol. (Oslo: October, 2009–2011).

[33] Karl Ove Knausgård, "Literature Should be Ruthless," interview by Kasper Bech Dyg at the Louisiana Literature festival in Humlebæk, Denmark, August 2016, audio. http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/karl-ove-knausgaard-literature-should-be-ruthless

[34] Knausgård, "Literature Should be Ruthless."

[35] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 748–49.

[36] Stefan Herbrechter and Elizabeth Friis, ed., *Narrating Life—Experiments with Human and Animal Bodies in Literature, Science and Art* (Leiden, NL: Brill Rodopi, 2016), vi.

[37] Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern* Europe (New York: Viking, 1993), ix.

[38] See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (1997; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[39] Hoffman, *Exit into History,* xi.

[40] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 739.

[41] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 750.

[42] See James Schiff, *John Updike Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1998), 119–20, for a detailed analysis of the mirror imagery.

[43] Updike, *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Random House, 2000), 768.

[44] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 746.

[45] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Roger Malvin's Burial," 1832; repr. *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 35 (1843): 186–96; and Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan, 1865).

[46] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 748.

[47] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 748.

[48] Vaclav Havel, "Politics and Conscience," in *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. By Jan Bažant, Nina Bažantová, and Frances Starn (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 448.

[49] Havel, "Politics and Conscience," 448.

[50] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 749.

[51] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 748 (first two quotations), and 739.

[52] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 740.

[53] Blaga Dimitrova (1922–2003) was one of the most popular and loved Bulgarian writers; she wrote more than forty volumes of poetry, novels, plays, and essays. She was critical of the socialist regime and some of her books were banned in the 1970s. She became the first democratically elected vice president in Bulgaria after the fall of communism. A winner of many literary prizes: the Herder Prize, the Hristo G. Danov Prize, the German Kogge Prize, Dimitrova was awarded the French Medal of Merit for Freedom.

[54] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 740.

[55] Krastan Dyankov (1933–1999) remains the foremost translator of American fiction in the Bulgarian language. He translated texts by William Faulkner, James Baldwin, Erskine Caldwell, W. E. B. Du Bois, Lillian Hellman, DuBose Heyward, Langston Hughes, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Carson McCullers, Toni Morrison, William Styron, John Kennedy Toole, Mark Twain, Tennessee Williams, Robert Penn Warren, John Updike, and others. The annual Krastan Dyankov Award for best translation of a contemporary English-language novel from English into Bulgarian was established in his name by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation (EKF). The EKF was founded by the US writer Elizabeth Kostova in 2007 with the mission to support and contribute to the promotion of Bulgarian literature and its translations into the English language.

[56] Quoted in William R. Ferris, "Krastan Dyankov: With Henrietta Tordorova," *Southern Cultures* 21, no. 2 (2015): 64, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26220277

[57] Krastan Dyankov, "Nasledstvo, koeto se razpechatva v budeshteto" [Baggage to be unpacked in future time]. Afterword to *Kentavarat* [*The Centaur*] by John Updike, trans. Krastan Dyankov (1967. Reprint Sofia: Narodna kultura, 1981, 2001), 280.

[58] Iskra Krapacheva, *Vestnik Standart* [Standard newspaper] January 29, 2009, qtd. in Marin Bodakov, "Vestnitsi bez vesti, krile bez angeli: Balgarskata presa spored John Updike" [Newspapers with no news, wings with no angels: The Bulgarian press according to John Updike], Burgas: *More* 1 (2010): 184–90; the translation is mine.

[59] Bodakov, "Vestnitsi bez vesti, krile bez angeli," 5.

[60] Orlin Spasov, "Updike v Bulgaria: medialnost I kontramedialnost" [Updike in Bulgaria: mediality / countermediality], *Kultura* 42 (October 23, 1998), n. pag..

[61] Bodakov, "Vestnitsi," 5.

[62] Bodakov, "Vestnitsi," 3.

[63] Briggs and Dojčinović, "John and Blaga," 1.

[64] Briggs and Dojčinović, "John and Blaga," 25.

[65] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 743.

[66] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 744.

[67] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 746.

[68] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 743.

[69] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 737.

[70] Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," 737.

[71] Updike, “The Bulgarian Poetess,” 745.

[72] Updike, “The Bulgarian Poetess,” 740; emphasis added.

[73] StarLing database server, *Vasmer's Dictionary*, http://starling.rinet.ru/cgi-bin/response.cgi?basename=\data\ie\vasmer&text_word=%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0&method_word=beginning&ww_word=on

[74] Schiff, *John Updike Revisited*, 119.

[75] The translation is mine. The original definition goes back to *A Grammar of the Bulgarian Language* (1939). *The Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language* provides the following definition for *главанàк*:

“Човек с голяма глава, но не много умен (Тука спада и глав-ан[-]ъ (и глав-ан-ак[-]ъ) “съ голѣма глава”, отъ него собствено име на село – Главановци въ зап. България; дебеланъ “дебел човѣкъ, шишко”...” Източникът на етимологията е Младенов, С. И Попвасилев, С. 1939. Граматика на българския езикъ. София. Стр. 159) *Прен. Разг. Руг.* За прост, недодялан или глупав човек,” *The Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language*. Second edition. 14 volumes. Edited by Kristalina Cholakova. et al. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Academic Publishing House. Sofia, BG: Prof. Marin Drinov, 2001. https://ibl.bas.bg/rbe/lang/bg/*ГЛАВАНАК*/

[76] Briggs and Dojčinović, “John and Blaga,” 30.

[77] Dix, “Autofiction: The Forgotten Face of French Theory,” 70.

[78] Updike, “The Bulgarian Poetess,” 749.

[79] Updike, “The Bulgarian Poetess,” 743.

Selected Bibliography

Benatov, Joseph. “Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958–2001.” PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008. https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3328526

Bloom, Myra. “Sources of the Self(ie): An Introduction to the Study of Autofiction in English.” *English Studies in Canada* 45, no. 1 (2019): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2019.0000

Bodakov, Marin. “Vestnitsi bez vesti, krile bez angeli. Balgarskata presa spored John Updike” [Newspapers with no news, wings with no angels: The Bulgarian press according to John Updike]. *More* 1 (2010): 184–90. http://file.burgas.bg/Magazine_Sea/1/13_Marin_Bodakov.pdf

Briggs, Ward, and Biljana Dojčinovič. "The Bulgarian Poetess: John and Blaga." *The John Updike Review* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 1–36.

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences.* New York: Random House, 1966.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan, 1865.

Cusset, Catherine. "The Limits of Autofiction," unpublished conference paper, 2012. http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFICTION.pdf

Dix, Hywel. "Autofiction: The Forgotten Face of French Theory." *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 7, no.1 (2017): 69–85. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/141468984.pdf

———, ed. *Autofiction in English*. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Doubrovsky, Serge. *Fils*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977.

Dyankov, Krastan. "Nasledstvo, koeto se razpechatva v budeshteto" [A legacy to be delivered in future time]. Afterword to *Kentavarat* [*The Centaur*] by John Updike, translated by Krastan Dyankov, 280–87. 1967. Sofia, BG: Narodna kultura, reprint 1981, 2001.

Ferrando, Francesca. *Philosophical Posthumanism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Ferreira-Meyers, Karen. "Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?." In *Autofiction in English*, edited by Hywel Dix), 27–48. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89902-2_2

Ferris, William R. "Krastan Dyankov: With Henrietta Tordorova." *Southern Cultures* 21, no. 2 (2015): 57–66. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26220277

Genette, Gérard. *Fiction and Diction*. Ithaca; NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Gibbons, Alison. "Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect." In *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, 117–30. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

Havel, Vaclav. "Politics and Conscience." In *The Czech Reader: History, Culture Politics*, edited by Jan Bažant, Nina Bažantová, and Frances Starn. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Roger Malvin's Burial." 1832. Reprint, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 35 (1843): 186–96.

Herbrechter, Stefan. *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality*. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2021.

———. *Posthumanism–A Critical Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Herbrechter, Stefan, and Elizabeth Friis, editors. *Narrating Life: Experiments with Human and Animal Bodies in Literature, Science and Art*. Leiden, NL: Brill Rodopi, 2016.

Hoffman, Eva. *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe.* New York: Viking, 1993.

Kaplan, Amy. *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Kanehara, Hitomi. *Ōto fikushon.* Tokyo: Shueisha, 2006.

Katsarova, Vesela. *Moyata rodina e tseliyat svyat: Zhenite v bulgarskata i anglo-amerikanskata literatura* [My country is the whole world: Women in Bulgarian and Anglo-American literature]. Sofia, BG: Polis, 2010.

Knausgård, Karl Ove. *Min kamp*. 6 volumes. Oslo: Oktober, 2009–2011.

———. "Literature Should be Ruthless." Interview by Kasper Bech Dyg at the Louisiana Literature Festival in Humlebæk, Denmark, August 2016. Audio. http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/karl-ove-knausgaard-literature-should-be-ruthless

Kosturkov, Yordan, translator. "Bulgarskata poetesa" [The Bulgarian poetess]. By John Updike. *Maritsa* (December 2004): 18–21.

———, translator. "Bulgarskata poetesa" [The Bulgarian poetess]. By John Updike. *Panorama* 3, no. 28 (2007): 45–61.

———. *Tainiyat zhivot na velikite amerikanski pisateli: Literaturni portreti*. [The secret lives of the great American writers: Literary portraits]. Plovdiv, BG: Hermes, 2012.

La Haije, Marileen. "Narration and Madness: Schizophrenia, Paranoia and Autofiction in Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*." *Confluencia* 32, no. 2 (2017): 145–55. https://doi.org/10.1353/cnf.2017.0012

Miller, Quentin. *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain.* Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

Nothomb, Amélie. *Stupeur et tremblements*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1999.

Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography.* New York: Routledge, 2016.

Schiff, James. *John Updike Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1998.

Shurbanov, Alexander. "Progeny of Orpheus." Introduction to *Scars* [Belezi] by Blaga Dimitrova. Translated by Ludmilla G. Popova-Wightman, 15–21. Princeton, NJ: Ivy Press, 2002.

Spasov, Orlin. "Updike v Bulgaria: medialnost I kontramedialnost" [Updike in Bulgaria: mediality / countermediality]. *Kultura* 42 (October 23, 1998). https://newspaper.kultura.bg/media/my_html/2051/updike.htm

Updike, John. "The Bulgarian Poetess." In *The Early Stories 1953–1975*, by John Updike, 737–750. New York: Knopf, 2003.

———. *More Matter: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Random House, 2000.

———. *Picked-up Pieces.* Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Books, 1975.

Worthington, Marjorie. *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018.