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Out of Place: Representations of the Eastern European Migrant in Rose Tremain's The Road Home

Abstract

Published in 2007, Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* is one of the earliest British novels to explore the experience of the post-enlargement Eastern European migrant. Conscientious in its confrontation of the destabilisation of identity, the isolation and prejudice suffered by its protagonist, ultimately it presents a positive account of what a period of employment abroad may bring to the individual, to the host- and native-culture. Its success largely springs from the credible, well-realised characters Tremain has assembled, whose back-stories, dilemmas and dreams continually engage the readers' sympathies. Where it is at its least satisfactory is its attempt to pass off the main character as an 'Eastern European Everyman', as if each of the peoples and states trapped in the Soviet bloc after 1945 were much of a muchness, lacking their own particular traits, cultures and histories. The article offers an extensive analysis of the novel in order to look closely at the representation of the Eastern European migrant in contemporary British fiction.

Key words

post-enlargement migration, Rose Tremain, *The Road Home*, contemporary British fiction, Polish migrants in the UK

> 'Being myself meant not only never being quite right, but also never feeling at ease, always expecting to be interrupted or corrected, to have my privacy invaded and my unsure person set upon'
>
> (Edward Said)[1]

I

The increasing visibility of the Eastern European migrant within British fiction is a consequence primarily of political and economic changes in Europe during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The year 2004 brought the biggest enlargement ever in the history of

the European Union, enabling the citizens of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Baltic States, Slovakia, and Slovenia to travel anywhere in Europe in search of work. With its economy seemingly buoyant, Britain confidently opened its doors wide to this substantial workforce in the belief that migrants could easily fill shortfalls of staff in a range of important sectors. Anxieties about a surge in migrant numbers were initially discounted by ministers and civil servants, with the Home Office anticipating a modest annual influx of approximately 13,000 people.[2] While the United Kingdom economy seemed to show no sign of slowing down, only occasionally were concerns voiced about the potential impact of migrants on social, education and health services, and on the employment prospects amongst the existing population. After all, the majority of newcomers were extremely well-qualified, quick in establishing a reputation for working hard, and prepared to tackle jobs that the local jobless spurned. Additionally the newcomers made a significant contribution through taxation.

Once the full extent of world economic crisis and accompanying recession manifested themselves, however, attitudes towards migrants began to change, leading to an ambivalence in some quarters, downright hostility in others, particularly in the wake of the austerity measures introduced by the new coalition government in 2010. Some Conservative politicians and a predominantly right-wing tabloid press exploited the crises in the eurozone to foment anti-European feeling and force the issue of immigration up the agenda. The substantial growth in support for the UK Independence Party[3] has alarmed the principal political parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat), so much so that they are currently vying with each other in their promises to tighten controls on 'our borders'. A report leaked to the *Sunday Times* contained proposals from the Conservative-dominated coalition government to reduce EU migration to 75,000 per year. Though the greatest number of immigrants to the UK come from China, this has not deterred the tabloid press from their obsession with arrivals from 'the old Warsaw pact nations',[4] a tendency which has intensified as the removal of controls on Bulgarian and Romanian migration became imminent.[5]

Given the knock-on effects that suddenly losing or acquiring a significant percentage of the national workforce can have on Europe's member states, it is entirely appropriate that contemporary fiction should contribute to the debate as to the benefits and drawbacks, national and individual, that arise from the unrestrained movement of labour. This essay examines a text which predates the economic meltdown of 2008, and illustrates its author's engagement with the migrants' experience in Britain. An event which may well have left some imprint on Tremain's novel is the Morecambe Bay tragedy of 5 February 2004 in which

twenty- three Chinese cockle-pickers drowned when they were cut off from rising tides. [6] The inquest into their deaths shone a sharp light on the terrible exploitation of migrant workers, many victims of ruthless traffickers in their native countries and gang-masters in Britain, all of whom rake off exorbitant amounts from people desperate to provide for their impoverished families back home. The tragedy was the subject of an acclaimed film by Nick Broomfield, *Ghosts*, which went on general release in September 2006.

II

Published in 2007, Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* is one of the earliest British novels to explore the experience of the post-enlargement Eastern European migrant. Conscientious in its confrontation of the destabilisation of identity, the isolation and prejudice suffered by its protagonist, ultimately it presents a positive account of what a period of employment abroad may bring to the individual, to the host- and native-culture. Its success largely springs from the credible, well-realised characters Tremain has assembled, whose back-stories, dilemmas and dreams continually engage the readers' sympathies. Where it is at its least satisfactory is its attempt to pass off the main character as an 'Eastern European Everyman',[7] as if each of the peoples and states trapped in the Soviet bloc after 1945 were much of a muchness, lacking their own particular traits, cultures and histories.

From its outset *The Road Home* demonstrates the skill and economy with which Tremain manages narrative. Starting with a circuitous sentence which sets off 'On the coach' and closes contemplating a roadside verge, the early paragraphs alert us to what will be the text's preoccupations with transit and transitoriness, forward and backward movements, contrasts in culture and landscape. It weaves in telling details about the individual at the centre of her novel, who is glimpsed watching a familiar rural terrain slipping away:

> On the coach, Lev chose a seat near the back and he sat huddled against the window, staring out at the land he was leaving: at the fields of sunflowers scorched by the dry wind, at the pig farms, at the quarries and rivers and at the wild garlic growing green at the edge of the road.
>
> Lev wore a leather jacket and jeans and a leather cap pulled low over his eyes and his handsome face was grey-toned from his smoking and in his hands he clutched an old red cotton handkerchief and a dented pack of Russian cigarettes. He would soon be forty-three (1)

Aspects of the character's psychological state are immediately signalled here, notably the low self-esteem which prompts him to opt for a seat to the rear of the vehicle, and the way he is

described huddling himself 'against the window', with his cap pulled down over his eyes as if shielding himself from the emotional draw of all that he is leaving. Lev's native landscape is depicted in fragmentary form, as if it were merely an assemblage of contiguous elements - sunflower fields, pig farms, quarries, rivers, patches of garlic. Narratorial attention then passes to Lev's appearance and its dualities, establishing that he is handsome forty-two year-old. This reveals that he is an in-between stage of his life, *en route* somewhere past youth, but still at a good distance from old age. His grey-toned complexion is not simply a consequence of his reliance on tobacco to get him through each day, but, as will emerge later, the mark of a tragic loss recently endured, and of a life of struggling to keep going in an impoverished, spirit-sapping, communist-run backwater. Like the old red handkerchief he grasps, an unlit cigarette functions as a form of companion, 'something to hold on to, something that had promise' (1).

So drained emotionally is he that on reaching his destination, he has no expectation of being absorbed or assimilated into the unknown culture, picturing instead how he will 'hold himself apart from other people, find corners and shadows in which to sit and smoke' (2). Solitary, unfixed, unsure of where he is heading, he resembles hundreds of thousands of migrants, compelled by necessity to uproot themselves since their countries lacks the economic infrastructure, resources and enterprise to support them and their families.

Intermittently, subtly, during this and succeeding chapters, the narrator feeds details about Lev's familial circumstances securing the reader's interest in and emotional concern for him, and underlining the immanence in the present of his past. One early paragraph, for example, starts innocently enough commenting on his current, relatively minor discomfort in trying to sleep sitting upright on the coach. Soon afterwards, as a way of informing us of his solicitousness as a father, mention is made of how whenever his young daughter was unwell or afraid, he would frequently sleep on a mat beside her bed. Hardly has the warmth evoked by that image registered before it is immediately swept aside by the stark revelation of his wife's recent death, and an account of his painful, bewildered, nightly vigils at her hospital bedside (2). In a flash, the reasons why he is travelling alone is made plain, and why he looks so ashen and withdrawn. To reiterate the point, the narrator deploys a poignant, yet terribly apt medical metaphor to describe his state, relating how Marina's death 'was with him always, like a shadow on the X-ray of his spirit' (6). As the novel unfolds, similarly sensitive commentary from the third-person narrator is increasingly combined with the use of Lev as focaliser. The purpose of this authorial strategy is to sustain the reader's empathy for a

protagonist whose actions can be at times indefensible, as he himself recognises in bouts of remorse.

Tremain's adeptness in establishing points of affinity and contrast between her characters is evident throughout the text. As early as the third paragraph, she introduces the first of three female 'others' in Lev's life, none of whom eclipses the woman he has lost. Lydia, a fellow traveller on the coach, functions as an important confidant, and steadfast guide and support to Lev.[8] It is quickly established that what they share is a nationality, and a conviction that to create a future they must relocate themselves somewhere else. The reasons Lydia has for quitting the confined, confining security of her post at School 237 in Yarbl are ones with which readers will readily sympathise:

> I became very tired of the view from my window. Every day, summer and winter. I looked out at the school yard and the high fence and the apartment block beyond, and I began to imagine that I would die seeing these things (3).[9]

With neither family nor friends in Britain, Lev comes to rely on Lydia as the hub of his network, particularly in the all-important initial phases of his stay. Her 'contained' appearance - a product of her education, knowledge of the English language, and familiarity with British culture - prompts him to regard her as an authority figure, an impression reinforced when he later spots the title of the paperback she is reading, *The Power and the Glory*. Discovering from their first conversation that she teaches English, he tests out on her random phrases picked up at night-school. Although the first of these hold no great significance, apart from 'I am legal', the second batch hints at the imbalance and one-sidedness of their future relationship: 'May you help me?', 'I am lost', 'I wish for an interpreter' (4). Before long Lydia aspires to rather more than a mediatory role in Lev's life, yet sadly her generosity towards him never quickens any other emotion than gratitude.[10]

The migrant's difficulties in interpreting visual and linguistic signifiers within the adopted culture are a recurrent feature in the opening chapters. An illustration of this is when, while still on the Trans-Euro coach, Lev inspects the crisp, new twenty-pound notes in his wallet. He comes to realise that even something as ordinary as a banknote harbours and withholds signification, embodies and amplifies difference. Although he instantly recognises 'the frumpy queen' on one side, he is puzzled by a figure with a drooping moustache featured on the reverse. After spotting that his dates spanned the years from 1857-1934, Lev concludes - wrongly - that this person lived through a charmed period of history, knowing no other

economic system than capitalism, unconscious of the terror Hitler and Stalin would unleash across Europe, unaware of the devastation London would soon be suffering during the Blitz. A strong impression Lev gained from his classes was that, compared to other European nations, the British were extremely fortunate in never being ‘subjected to Occupation’ (5). He recalls his teacher’s observation that the British people had a somewhat partial grasp of their own history, which manifested itself in a reluctance to acknowledge that ‘some of their past deeds were not good’ (6).

Over-simplified and undeveloped though they are, these perspectives on Britain from the outside prepare us for an important dimension to *The Road Home*. Like Gulliver’s in Lilliput, Brobdingnag and Houyhynym land, Lev’s defamiliarising experiences shed an intense light on both his temporarily-adopted and native lands, as will be detailed later. In the course of *his* travels, thanks to Lydia, Lev discovers a great deal about that mystery man, whose face, name and dates are etched on the banknote. Her teacherly aim in relating the story of Sir Edward Elgar’s rise from obscurity is to offer a template for his own future. She explains how, like him, Elgar was brought up in an insignificant provincial town, and spent much of his life ashamed, and being made to feel ashamed of his humble social origins. Despite, or rather because of his disadvantageous start in life, Elgar resolved to create ‘something great’ (93). Though condensed and curtailed, Lydia’s parable has a gradual, but eventually overwhelming effect on Lev, planting the conviction that he too might become an accomplished artist of sorts. It is no accident that after viewing many potential premises for his restaurant in Baryn, he eventually settles on a dusty old piano shop (348), one which closely resembles the one in which Elgar grew up and that Lydia had actually mentioned to him (93). In the novel’s later stages, literally and metaphorically, Lev finds himself repeatedly turns to a gift Lydia handed to him at the time of his first Christmas in England, a paperback copy of *Hamlet*. 'I think for us, who are exiles’, she had told him, ‘this play has very much meaning. You may see this as you read. Hamlet, you know, is cast out. Or rather he casts himself out, so that he can make things right in the place he's left behind' (133). That Tremain’s fictional migrant comes to identify so intensely with such a native British icon and such an iconic English text might be seen as indicative of her optimistic, liberal stance on migrancy and the possibilities it opens up for accumulating knowledge, extending perspectives, lifting aspirations and life-chances.

III

Composed prior to the worldwide economic crisis, it is hardly surprising that Tremain's novel should endorse certain capitalist values so whole-heartedly, or that its most insistent motif should be that of the dream. What motivates its main protagonist is not a hunger for personal gain, however, but the vision of a modest adequacy. Lev takes the emigrant route from a desire to provide his daughter with basic commodities, 'clothes, shoes, books, toys' (5). An affectionate, loyal son, he is determined to support his mother through her later years. And, when he finally embarks on the road home, it is with a dream of helping not just his immediate family and dearest friends, but also the dispirited people of his region who have never known the pleasure of dining out on excellent food, in a establishment that prides itself on its service to patrons.

The deep antipathy which Lev and his circle hold towards the deadening political stasis that persists in his homeland is reflected throughout the text. To possess, as Lev does, a 'vibrant imagination' is deemed a dangerous flaw in the totalitarian state in which he was raised. 'Life is not for dreaming, Lev', his boss at the Baryn saw-mill tried drilling into him: 'Dreaming leads to subversion' (6). Unlike preceding generations, beaten into resignation by decades of governmental neglect and negligence in the rural areas, Lev's believes in the possibility of an alternative reality. They cannot acquiesce to the dictum Lev's drunken, Party-card-carrying father lives by that 'Things can only be *what they are*' (78; original italics).[11]

When, back in Auror, Lev succumbed to feelings of helplessness, self-doubt and bouts of fury, what sustained him was his friend Rudi's strength of character, and his 'counter-revolutionary', transgressive tendencies which were more pronounced than his own. Like Lydia before him, Rudi is presented to us as the antithesis of Lev. He is depicted through his friend's admiring eyes as a pugnacious figure, who 'never surrendered to anything', who 'fought a pitched battle with life through every waking hour', and slept 'with his fists bunched in front of his chest, like a boxer's' (10). To keep up his spirits on the wearying, anxious journey across northern Europe, Lev recalls Rudi's aphorisms: 'Life is just a *system.*…All that matters is cracking the system' (10), and 'Only the resourceful survive' (16). To less besotted readers, however, Rudi appears an impulsive, impractical, opportunistic individual, whose imagination rarely strays beyond the short-term and the next transaction.[12] Illustrative of this is his manic desire to own a once-beautiful, but barely-functioning vintage American car, with a mere 240,000 miles on the clock. To acquire this, he is willing to

sacrifice all the money he has, along with his sheepskin coat, fur hat and five bottles of vodka (12). Its very name, the Chevrolet Phoenix, has an emblematic quality, and reflects his own longing 'to take off' (11) and regenerate himself as Auror's most stylish taxi-driver. Ironically, at the very time Lev is moving into top gear, gathering the wherewithal to accelerate his family's fortunes, Rudi's costly toy is standing idle for want of parts (259-60), and its owner slipping into a vodka-fuelled depression (278, 291-2).

The Road Home is perhaps at its most affecting during its first half when it traces the early stages of Lev's painfully slow, uneven progress towards a degree of financial sufficiency. His experience of the difficulties of life as a migrant worker begins in earnest with his arrival at Victoria Coach Station in London, and in the wake of Lydia's departure. Heading post-haste for the station toilets, desperate to wash himself thoroughly, he pauses a moment to stare at his dirty shoes. This leads him to contemplate how, out of necessity. he is compromising his identity in leaving his homeland: 'This is the mud of my country, the mud of all Europe, and I must find some rags to wipe it away' (18). Outside the washroom, he finds himself confronted by a physical, then a linguistic barrier, preventing him from accessing the facilities. Without the necessary change, he approaches an elderly man, using one of his best English phrases ('Please, may you help me?'), only to be ignored. He turns next to a young workman, in expectation of a better response. Though the man smiles as he gives Lev a coin, he then snatches from his hand one of his precious twenty-pound notes, and disappears into the washroom:

> Lev gaped. Not a single word of English would come to him now and he cursed loudly in his own language. Then he saw the man coming back towards him with a smile… He held the twenty-pound note out to Lev. 'Only joking,' he said. 'Just joking, mate' (19).

This will not be the sole occasion when Lev's acute feelings of vulnerability and disorientation are exacerbated. Soon after, refreshed after a wash, a shave and a change into clean clothing, he steps out into the bewildering London rush. Although he is very hungry and thirsty, he decides not to risk entering a coffee shop in case he again faces the embarrassment of not having the right change. Instead, finding a quiet street, he leans against a plane tree and, after taking a quick slug of vodka, slips into a brief siesta. A rude awakening ensues, courtesy of a policeman, who immediately adopts an extremely rough, heavy-handed manner towards Lev assuming that he must be with yet another scrounging asylum-seeker. When Lev

moves to extract his passport from his pocket, he instantly pounces, grabbing his wrist 'with fearsome force', yanking him to his feet, pinioning him 'against the tree' (22). Disappointed to learn that Lev has a legitimate right to be in the UK, the policeman subjects him to a further humiliation, an inspection of the contents of his bag. Ironically, he warns Lev he will face a heavy fine for 'anti-social behaviour' (24), should he be caught sleeping rough again.

Pointedly, Tremain contrasts the police officer's incivility towards Lev - and subsequently the confrontational stance taken by a group of young mothers (41)[13] - with the welcoming reception he meets with from a series of kindly individuals, all of whose families originate far from Britain. The first of these is Sulima, the sari-clad, smiling proprietor of the Champions Bed and Breakfast Hotel, who, after confiding to him how she was helped when she first arrived in the country as a migrant (32), advises him that he might well find work at a food outlet on the Earls Court Road. This suggestion leads to his encounter with the eponymous owner of *Ahmed's Kebabs*. Ahmed begins by generously providing Lev with a free meal, and then a job distributing fliers. His motivation in doing so, he explains, is religious, prompted by the expectation that 'deeds of unselfish kindness will be rewarded in Heaven' (37). It is while delivering Ahmed's leaflets, with their promise of *'Best Luxury Halal Meat; Best Prices*' and, most importantly, '*Friendly Service'* that Lev has a flashback to a treat he arranged for Marina back home, one of the rare occasions when they ate out:

> The waiters and waitresses had behaved like labour-camp guards, slamming down dishes of sinewy meat, sloshing out wine from dirty carafes, snatching their plates away before their meal was finished (39).
>
> In due course, the recollection of that dire experience feeds into his 'Great Idea' of opening his own restaurant.[14]

Witnessing Lev's continuing struggle with his grief, Ahmed reacts with compassion and determines to do what he can to help him get his life back on track. In what proves to be a very useful tip, he encourages Lev to scan the job and accommodation pages in the *Evening Standard* (49). His difficulty in understanding the wording of the newspaper advertisements is what prompts Lev to make contact with Lydia. An invitation to dine with her friends in Muswell Hill follows, an occasion which will have important short- and long-term consequences for Lev's future. The acute pleasure of being able to speak in his own tongue again is enhanced by the 'exquisite savour' (59) of the dishes Lydia's friend, Larissa, sets before her guests. At subsequent points in his odyssey, Lev encounters similarly

extraordinary culinary skills in two very different London restaurants,[15] while working for master-chefs who quicken his passion for cooking. However, while staying over in Larissa and her husband's house, he suffers considerable discomfort when, in the early hours, he is subjected to unexpected, unwelcome sexual overtures from Lydia. The gentle manner in which he handles this situation is to his credit, yet repeatedly, later in the novel, he exploits the affection she retains for him. Lydia immediately makes ample amends, first by securing an interview for him at G.K. Ashe's restaurant in Clerkenwell (65) where he is given employment as a kitchen porter at a rate of £5.30 an hour, and then by finding him suitable lodgings in nearby Tufnell Park.

Not unsurprisingly, given the novel's preoccupation with the migrant condition, Christy Slane, Lev's new housemate, turns out to be another exile. An Irishman, adrift in a country for which he has little love, Christy functions as yet another of the novel's flawed male characters, whose solitariness mirrors Lev's,[16] whose alcohol dependency resembles Stefan's (Lev's father) and prefigures Rudi's. It is excessive drinking that has led to his separation from his English wife and much-loved daughter, which has left him embittered and deepened his crippling lack of self-esteem. Christy's animosity towards his wife manifests itself in frequent sexist outbursts, such as his assertions that women 'have got us by the balls in this century' (70) and that many of them 'belong on the fucking moon' (124), but also in the revealingly glib and clichéd observations he makes about the disparities between his mother country and England:

> Christy reminded Lev that Ireland was a land of song. He said music was in the green of the hedgerows and in the bleating of sheep; it was in the dreaming coves…and in the malting houses of the Guinness breweries. He said England had no songs, only marches and embarrassing old laments for dead glories (83).

Ignoring his friend's suggestion that he demand payment in cash from G.K. Ashe in order to avoid paying tax, Lev demonstrates rectitude and his gratitude for the country that has taken him in, and so counters a charge often levelled against migrants by Little Englander parties that they contribute little to the economy. What redeems Christy, in part, is the warmth and fellow feeling he consistently displays to his housemate, evident from their very first meeting when he notes the tenderness with which Christy looks at the photograph of Maya he proffered (71). By locating Lev in a girl-child's room amid her toys (68), and by depicting scenes which stress how much Christy misses *his* daughter (84-5, 110-112, 167-72, 178-183),

Tremain underlines a key aspect of Lev's plight and what motivates him to work with such determination.

A third of the way through the text, a new, 'native' English character grows in prominence, a counterweight to Lydia and her influence. Briefly mentioned as the individual assigned to 'vegetable and salad preparation' (76) at G.K. Ashe's, Sophie takes part in a brief, first exchange with Lev as she leaves the restaurant one night.[17] Her impact is dramatically registered a few days later while, at Lydia's invitation, Lev is attending an Elgar concert at the Festival Hall. Keen to retain her presence in Lev's life, his erstwhile, equally solitary travelling companion wants to initiate him into classical music, but also to introduce him to her employer, Maestro Greszler, a compatriot of theirs. During the preamble to the event, Lev displays a rare tenderness towards Lydia, briefly taking her hand: 'He thought her valiant and found himself wishing – for her sake as much as his - that she was prettier than she was' (96). At the very moment, the performance of Elgar's Cello Concerto is about to begin, Lev's mobile rings loudly. Mortified at neither being able to find the phone nor stop it, he rushes from the Festival Hall, with little thought at the time for the friend he has abandoned. Once home, he is amazed to discover that the totally unanticipated call was from Sophie, which has the effect of initiating his interest in her.

In the aftermath of this embarrassing '*dee-backle*' (99), as Christy terms it, Lydia's hold over Lev increasingly weakens. The demands she places on him to extend himself intellectually he feels incapable of meeting. Back in the security of Belisha Road, Lev confides to Christy his conviction that he 'does not belong' in middle-class locales like 'Muswell Hill, Festival Hall'. Ironically, his future relationship with Sophie plunges him into very similar milieux, and exposes him to the smug and superficial types with whom she regularly socialises. By re-igniting his sexual passion, Sophie transforms Lev, enabling him 'to come alive again' (130). However, it quickly becomes apparent to the reader that she lacks the imagination to meet him at a deeper level and bridge the cultural divide, Frequently she is glimpsed looking away from him, as if his hold on her attention was only temporary.[18] And though her name is derived from the Greek for 'wisdom', that is ironically a quality she possesses in short supply.

By making Lev's new partner so well-connected within London's social and cultural elite, Treman alters and extends the narrative's focus and reach. The central character is placed in a number of social contexts, where he is repeatedly subjected to condescension and marginalisation, which have the effect of magnifying his isolation, and leaving him feeling 'helpless and ignorant' (119). At the same time she enlists Lev's perspective in order to

satirise the shallowness and insularity of contemporary British culture, particularly in *The Road Home*'s middle chapters, 8-14.[19] The targets the author chooses to critique might be viewed as somewhat lightweight, and not dissimilar to the pretentious and limited types parodied in *Absolutely Fabulous*.[20] Given that Lev would be unlikely to come into contact with the truly powerful in Britain, its economic and political elite, one can understand why these do not figure on the novel's radar. It was only following the banking collapses of 2008 and parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009 that these came under intense critical scrutiny, *after* the novel was written.

It is on their first night out together in one of the pubs she frequents that Sophie introduces Lev to two people with whom she often hangs out, fashion-designer, Sam Diaz-Morant, and Andy Portman, who works in the theatre. The way they are represented borders on caricature, yet they fulfil a useful role in exemplifying common British attitudes towards outsiders and in shedding light on Sophie's character. That she regards them as 'good company' (118) suggests that she is rather in thrall to the concept of celebrity, imagining that proximity to the capital's *glitterati* might somehow ratify her own identity. She keeps up a ceaseless patter of praise about Sam and her 'amazing' creations, informing Lev how her status as a rising star is all down to miniature hats, like the 'baby black topper' she is sporting that night. That Sam's clients include the Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie, then sixth and seventh in line to the throne, produces nothing more than an ambiguous, uncommitted interrogative 'Yes?' from Lev; to the discovery that 'the days of the unironic hat are completely past' (115), he responds in exactly the same fashion.

In the hope of eliciting more of a reaction from him perhaps, Sam starts to qualify Sophie's claims about her, displaying in her speech what seems to be a characteristic of her work: repetition. And so each time Sophie alludes to another indicator of her success, Sam immediately qualifies her assertions, stating that she is 'Not rich-rich…Just comfy', that her recent show in London Fashion Week was 'Not big-big', and that she really is 'Not amazing-amazing' (115). As if to confirm how unspoilt she is by public acclaim, she points out that she is still resides in Kentish Town, distancing herself from the swankier areas of north London like Cannonbury, Highbury, Highgate or Hampstead. Lest the reader suspects that underneath it all Sam may not be simply an over-hyped, talentless narcissist, the third-person narrator intervenes at this juncture. The sarcastic redeployment of a phrase of Sophie's and the use of an animal image leave little doubt about the narrator's opinion of Sam, who, then by following her gaze, hints at a calculating, almost predatory side to her character:

> The Amazing Star was *looking* Lev *over*. Her *ferret* eyes *flickered* from his newly washed grey hair to his mouth, and then to his left hand, on which he still wore his wedding ring…'Tell me about hats in your country, Lev' (115-16; my emphases).

While her inquiry might be interpreted as an attempt to move the conversation on after her *faux pas*, it could be seen as demonstrating what little curiosity she has about him as a person. Her motivation in addressing Lev is to establish whether there might be a market for her chic designs in his country and/ or a chance to copy its 'ethnic headwear'. Her admission that 'I've never visited your country but somehow I imagine women in headscarves' (116) betrays a common British assumption about Central and Eastern Europe, that in each of its countries people dress like extras in *Dr Zhivago*.

Before Lev has a chance to correct her misconceptions, Sam has already turned from him to embrace a young man with floppy hair. This turns out to be an up-and-coming *enfant terrible* of British theatre, playwright Andy Portman, whose very first action, the narrator helpfully informs us, is to remove his dark glasses,[21] the better to take in 'Samantha's skimpy cleavage' (116). Portman's arrival allows Tremain the opportunity to take a satirical, but hardly original swipe at London's 'luvvies' and their affectations. To Sam's effusive greeting ('*darling*', 'petal'), Portman replies in kind, addressing her as 'beautiful', 'babe', 'sweetheart', and implying how taken he is by her outfit: 'Love the dress. Love the boots. And *love* the dinky topper!' (117).

For a considerable time, Portman completely ignores Sophie and Lev's presence, focusing entirely on Sam instead since he undoubtedly sees her as more of a social equal. His chagrin at failing to secure the services of Eton-educated - and unsubtly-named[22] - Sheridan Ponsonby for the lead role in his latest play tells us something about the class loyalties of this supposedly radical playwright. Despite Sam's claim that *Peccadilloes*, [23] his current masterpiece, embraces 'the total infiniteness of the human imagination' (118), it is apparent that that 'totality' does not extend to those he views as social inferiors. Having learnt from Sam that Sophie's friend is merely 'le plongeur' at GK Ashe's, he almost immediately disappears to the bar. When Lev joins him there and asks about the thesis underpinning his play, Andy sighs, but then reluctantly obliges. While able to follow part of the potted history of British theatre since the 1950s, which is reduced to successive shifts of location from drawing room to kitchen to bedroom, Portman's inconsiderate habit of name-checking

playwrights completely unfamiliar to him adds Lev's pre-existing feelings of frustration and inadequacy. Again readers are given privileged access to the protagonist's inner thoughts:

> He noticed that his hand holding a ten-pound note was red and raw from its hours immersed in dishwater, like some uncooked raw vegetable. And he thought, This is how these people see me – as a turnip with no intelligence and no voice (120).

Unconscious of the cultural and linguistic difficulties his words might pose for a non-native speaker, Portman proceeds to make a number of unwarranted assumptions as to what Lev's viewpoint might be when it comes to the 'filth…inside us'. Forgetting how Lev earns his living, he airily opines, 'I guess you – like almost everyone else – just want to be presented with everything nice and clean and refreshed and made ready for you' (120). Blithely confident about his and, to a lesser extent, Britain's cultural superiority, he regards it as his duty to spell out to Johnny Foreigner the way things stand:

> 'In your country you've got a lot of catching up, art-wise. That's fine. I completely understand… But here in Britain we're at the cutting edge of things and the work has to be razor-sharp, otherwise it won't fucking cut' (121).

Following Portman's departure, Lev remains alone at the bar, nursing his vodka and fury. Soon after Sophie comes to his side, sensing how ill-at-ease her companions have made him. Though she endeavours to remedy the situation by stroking his neck and then kissing him violently as if 'to lock him to her' (121), he instantly detaches himself from her and beats a retreat, in an effort to preserve his rage and self-respect.

As so often, on his return to his apartment, memories flood back to occasions when he experienced rare joy and security, such as on his mother's sixty-fifth birthday when he gave her the poinsettias, and when on his way to school she would hold his hand. Not unsurprisingly, given the anger engendered by yet another failed social encounter, and his exasperation at being unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings in an alien tongue, he achieves a small measure of relief in his own writing to his mother. Despite the fact that his letter makes no mention of Sophie, it is primarily her that he has in mind when at the outset he refers to his uncertainties over '*what anybody is thinking of me or what I am really thinking about them'* (122: original italics). In order to strike a more positive note, he emphasises how much his culinary understanding is advancing from working alongside such a great chef, and speculates, presciently, that '*this could be useful in my life somehow'* (123). In his closing remarks he dwells on the contrast between the frugality within the kitchen, in

which anything left-over, like carcasses and ends of vegetables, is turned into stock, and the wastefulness in the dining room, where customers regularly leave so much food uneaten on their plates, which is then bagged and dumped.

Chapter Eight's twin preoccupations with the arts and with material excess persist into succeeding chapters. As his first Christmas in Britain approaches, Lev is shocked to witness the rampant commercialisation abroad, the 'daze and worry' it generates on so many 'people's eyes' (125). Searching for something for Maya, he observes that, compared to their 'quiet' counterparts back home, children's toys here are loud and ostentatious: 'they *screeched* and *flashed* from shop windows in *vengeful* colours, *parading* huge price tags' (125; my italics).[24] Lev is not immune to this culture of extravagance. Keen to exhibit how well he is doing, he spends a lavish amount on his daughter's gift, a life-like doll, and derives considerable pleasure from picturing her cradling it, and playing with its many accessories.

During a pre-Christmas walk in a park around this time, Lydia points out a tree decked with brown, red and yellow shapes made from papier mache, and then holly trees draped with bolts of scarlet cloth'. To him these decorations are superfluous, a ridiculous intrusion on the beauty of nature. When he asks what meaning they add, Lydia gently reproves him, saying that 'you can't ask that question any more, Lev….Art is just itself, these days' (128). It is another indication of their different perspectives, and how willing she is to accept uncritically currently fashionable western ideas about what constitutes 'art'.

Yet for her, other facets of British culture are appalling, especially the discourtesy and indiscipline she has encountered while employed as a nanny. The spoilt middle-class children she is paid to look after have no interest in traditional forms of entertainment like stories, only in the crude, violent fare provided by computer games. Recognising and abusing their power over her, seven year-old Jemima and nine year-old Hugo mock her to her face by calling her 'Muesli' and regularly tell her to 'F off' (131).

Necessarily, for reasons of plot, theme and character development, Lev's relationship with Sophie is renewed at this juncture. Through her, he is introduced to Ferndale Heights Care Home, which is where he meets an important future benefactor, Mrs Ruby Constad, whose bequest helps him to realise his Great Idea, and where he gains invaluable experience and income as a chef. To readers, it is Sophie's willingness to put in a six-hour shift at the home on Christmas Day that greatly enhances her appeal, as well as the sensitivity and compassion she shows for the residents: 'When you're old, nobody touches you, nobody listens to you- not in this bloody country. So that's what I do: I touch and I listen' (137). On arriving at Ferndale, Sophie takes him straight away to meet Ruby, her favourite, who

displays a genuine warmth[25] towards him and an interest that contrasts markedly with the reception he was given by Sam and Andy Portman. References to the way Ruby is neglected by both her children (140, 146) echo Lydia's comments on the younger generations' lack of respect for their elders.

The relationship between Lev and Sophie proceeds for a while on an upward trajectory, yet its descent is due largely to the very same factors which marred their first date together: the British infatuation with celebrity, the rage it manages to provoke in Lev, and the dearth in mutual understanding, itself a product of a massive gulf in culture and life experiences. G.K. Ashe's restaurant again acts as the location for pivotal episodes in his and their future. Soon after Christmas, following a staffing crisis, they both experience a sudden lift in their careers, when the boss promotes Sophie to second sous-chef and Lev is given responsibility for vegetable preparation. At this critical moment, Tremain introduces a new minor character into the narrative - another migrant, and fellow countryman - who serves as the vehicle for the news that ultimately compels Lev to embark on the journey home. Seventeen year-old Vitas, his replacement as Nurse, could not be more different than Lev, harbouring as he does a profound hatred of England, their boss GK, and people he terms 'immigrant scum' (161).[26] One night while chatting before leaving work, Lev mentions the name of his mother's village to Vitas, who drops a metaphorical bombshell when he relates rumours of a plan to construct a new dam in Baryn, which will submerge Auror (162). When Lev attempts to verify the story by ringing Rudi and Lora back home, he learns that the people most affected, the inhabitants, know nothing of this proposal, despite the fact that their country has supposedly entered into a 'new era of openness' (163).

Hard on its heels of this discovery, Lev is confronted with another, albeit less dramatic loss, which turns his mind decidedly east again, and makes 'his head…full of his own language' (187). This is the revelation that Lydia, is leaving London, and is about to travel the world in the role of mistress to seventy-two year-old Maestro Greszler. She confesses that she is drawn to the idea of a life of luxury, and suspects that she 'must have caught the English consumer disease' (186). He does not condemn her decision to ally herself with a 'genius', who happens to have abandoned a wife and three children back home. That what he feels for Lydia is not solely and simply gratitude and affection is disclosed when the narrative voice informs us how he keeps imagining scenes from Lydia's new life, culminating with an image of her 'in a king-size bed with her elderly lover' (187); later the narrator adds that 'Images of Marina laid themselves in strange configurations over images of Lydia in his weary mind' (188). The withdrawal of this critical mentor-figure at this point intensifies

Lev's purposefulness and sense of self-reliance, qualities that *partially* restore him in the readers' eyes after the appalling sexual violence inflicted on Sophie (240-2), which arises from a jealous possessiveness.

The beginning of the end of the Lev-Sophie relationship comes with the appearance in the restaurant of Howie Preece, described by its smitten chef-proprietor as 'one of the most famous young artists on the planet' (187).[27] Understandably, GK is desperate to attract high-profile, high-spending celebrities to his premises, and repeatedly peers out from the kitchen at table three's star occupant, 'his eyes lingering *greedily*' (188; my italics). Just as their night's work is coming to a close, Lev is alarmed seeing Sophie changing into fresh whites and applying 'glossy lipstick' in order to accompany GK in some schmoozing; her admission that she already knows Preece 'through Sam and Andy' only fuels Lev's anxiety.

On hearing the next morning Preece's name in association with Sophie, Christy advises his flatmate never to count on the constancy of 'English girls', given that they are 'as fickle as the tide' (192). True to her aim of fostering ambivalent attitudes towards all the flawed souls she represents, Tremain combines Christy's tendency to indulge in crudely chauvinist, anti-English outbursts with moments of genuine insight, directly arising from being 'out of place'.[28] At this particular juncture, he serves a vehicle for steering the novel back into satirical mode when he launches into a scathing portrait of the young artist. Targeted now is the current British vogue for 'conceptual art', which the Irishman dismisses as pretentious and worthless, in short, a '*con*'.[29] The Irishman recalls for Lev's - and the readers' - benefit an occasion when he came face to face with one of Howie Preece's installations, a double helix constructed from old, frayed tennis balls, a meditation on human fragility and/ or mortality, he was meant to deduce (191). Subsequently, evidence which might lead many readers to concur with Christy's scepticism crops up in the form of an extract from a weekend colour supplement which cleverly parodies the preciousness of some art-speak. Under the headline, 'Preece Wraps it Up', Lev encounters an illustration and an analysis of *Bubble Wrap*, a curved piece of white plastic studded with hundreds of lightbulbs. According to the owner of the gallery, where this supposedly 'complex' masterwork is on display, the 'fluid shape' of the piece

> suggests a cunning absence of rigidity. Preece's explorations of the way one object, by mimetic appropriation, gives new meaning to another confirm him as one of the most interesting artists working in Britain today (227).

The ‘*arduous hours*’ that went into the making of this and other contrived objects in this new exhibition are in actuality not undertaken by Preece himself, but by two assistants in his studio. Appropriation, indeed.

Fittingly, the scene which most exemplifies the ‘savage indignation’[30] that so-called high culture excites in Tremain’s migrant protagonist is set in London’s Royal Court Theatre.[31] Lev and Sophie are there to attend the press night of Andy Portman’s sensationalist new play. Five and a half pages are given over to a flat account of *Peccadilloes*’ crass plot and gross, ludicrously-named characters, interspersed with references to Lev’s, his partner’s and the audience’s contrasting reactions. Central to the action are an affluent middle-class couple, consisting of a sexually-dissatisfied wife, Deluda, and her husband, Dicer, who is fixated on their pre-pubescent daughter, Bunny; shortly before the interval, he is depicted at his computer, clicking on images of naked children, and then purchasing an inflatable girl-doll, customised to incorporate his own child’s face (205). The prominence given to Dicer, his pervertedness and hypocrisy, and the crude, voyeuristic manner in which he is represented are calculated to appal readers and enrage the character with whom they most empathise, the loving father of Maya.

Well before the curtain rises, Lev is already experiencing in a heightened state of anxiety, as he did when his odyssey began. Invisible, voiceless, ‘unregarded, his role here is not solely to stand in for so many others on the fringes of British society, but to expose the artifice and pretentiousness that pervade social interactions. What he overhears in the lobby, he recognises as ‘not mere innocent chatter’ among the theatre’s predominantly middle-class *aficionados*, but rather a pre-rehearsed '*symphony* of talk, a *performance* of conversation' (200). Sophie has behaved gracelessly towards him, grabbing the pre-show drink he bought, then disappearing to mingle with her much more exciting friends. Looking up to establish her whereabouts, he catches sight of her alongside Sam, happily basking in the spotlight that surrounds Howie Preece. Observing the eagerness with which all three swivel to greet, embrace, pay homage to Andy Portman when he enters the room, sickness and exhaustion overwhelm him.

Minutes later he is trapped inside the theatre, sandwiched between Sophie, who seems for long periods oblivious of his presence, and an overweight stranger, whose right leg almost constantly jiggles up and down, causing Lev’s seat to shake. The narrator maintains a running commentary on his intense discomfort, physical and psychological; how, when he strokes Sophie’s arm, she ‘jerked away from him’, as if his touch ‘hurt or offended her’ (204); how, because he feels ‘unbearably hot’, trying to remove his new suede coat seems comparable to

extricating himself from a straitjacket; and how, on both occasions she 'hisses' at him, angered by his inability to fall under the play's spell (209-10). At the interval, she brusquely steers him to the bar where Preece is dispensing free champagne. En route, her irritation and embarrassment become acute when Lev voices his disgust at 'this horrible play', prompting some of the milling theatregoers to turn and stare. Lev's rancour intensifies on coming face to face with his rival in Sophie's affections for the first time. Again pointed narratorial interventions, along with a constant focus on Lev's perspective, ensure that we share the latter's aversion to the 'slug-'jowled Preece. Attention is drawn to the latter's discourtesy in failing to look up when Sophie introduces her foreign friend, and there seems an subconscious ambiguity to Preece's question about 'That creature…on your arm' (209). Disconcerted that his famous name should meet with such indifference, the artist responds by barely acknowledging Lev's presence, directing his entire focus on the girl: '"Sexy girl, Sophie, in't she?" he said, *as if to Lev*, but *still gazing at Sophie* with large, sleepy eyes' (209; my emphasis). The short paragraph that follows takes us inside Lev's head, and prepares us for the impending clash. 'He wanted to... oh, he couldn't say what he wanted to do' registers his hurt and anger at seeing Sophie's blush, emotions exacerbated when she embarks on a discussion of the first act which initially excludes him. Whereas Preece cites the play's supposed authenticity as grounds for his admiration ('Bet half the fuckers in Chelsea are screwing their kids senseless'), Sophie is unable to offer any rationale for hers when questioned as to why she thinks it 'brilliant'. Ignoring Preece's patronising reference to him as the 'man from a distant country' (210), Lev directs his aggression solely at her, appalled by what he perceives as a contemptible shallowness and insularity:

> I understand you now. You don't see anything! You see what is 'fashion', what is 'smart' . That's all that matters to you. Because you don't know the world. Only this small England....I'm mad...Crazy maybe. But I'm not sick, like this play' (210).

Seconds after this outburst, Lev launches a physical attack on Sophie, wrapping his arm around her neck, making her 'choke and gasp'. To his credit, Preece swiftly comes to her aid, seizing Lev by the chin, forcing him to relinquish his hold. Defeated by a stronger man, he walks out of the theatre, conscious that there can be no possibility of restoring the relationship with Sophie after this mad, disgraceful episode. Finding a nearby pub, he downs glass after glass of vodka and Guinness, drinks emblematic of his and Christy's otherness. Under the

influence of the prodigious amount of alcohol he has consumed, dejection sets in along with a sense that 'Nothing could, or would, ever be the right way up. Or if it was, it wouldn't last' (212).

Waking the next morning in an unfamiliar London street, he is placed under arrest. His brand-new £170 jacket is covered in sick, so he dumps it in the police station wash-room in anticipation that his time with Sophie is at an end. To make matters worse he receives an £80 fine, and, on discovering that his wallet, cash, credit card and phone are all missing.[32] As if this dire sequence was not bad enough, he falls into so deep a sleep back at Belisha Road that he misses the entire night's work at GK. Ashe's. When he obeys the chef's instruction that he appears at the restaurant the following afternoon, it is to be informed that his services are no longer required because of the '*mess*' (231) his affair with Sophie has introduced into the workplace. Despite the respect in which he holds Lev, his work and dilgence, GK opts to retain her services for commercial reasons, pointing out that she is 'too well-connected' (233) to let go.

In the preamble to the brutal encounter which obliterates all possibility of a rapprochement, Tremain depicts Lev's immersion in *Hamlet*. Focalisation is again skillfully deployed to expose the extent to which he identifies with the misogynistic prince, reading Sophie as if she were simply a composite Gertrude-Ophelia figure, the embodiment of female frailty and betrayal:

> *Heaven and earth! Must I remember?*
>
> Remember what? Back and forth, back and forth to the notes, his mind a saw, trying to shriek through a tough bark of words.
>
> *A little month…*
>
> *…Within a month…she married.*
>
> So that was it. A woman's treachery! As it would be, thought Lev. Because it's what the *women* do that kills us (238).

When, unexpectedly, the doorbell interrupts these reflections, and Sophie materialises before him, the first thing she comments on is his copy of *Hamlet*, before - somewhat tactlessly, yet ironically - confessing how 'Howie's just *overwhelmed* me. I've never felt so ridiculously in love before' (239). Incapable of glossing his hurt in a foreign tongue, overwhelmed by his desire to possess and punish, Lev overpowers Sophie, forcing her into sex. Although certain details ('She began to move with him. She clung to him') imply that the coupling may have become consensual at some point, against that must be weighed the narrative's emphasis on

his actions, *his* justifications, *his* imaginings.[33] A reference to the restoration of 'her appetite, her insatiable, irresistible greed for the male' alerts us to the fact that he is projecting onto her his insatiable, irresistible desire; tellingly, one paragraph begins, another ends with the verb 'slammed' to describe the moments of penetration and orgasm. Lev's subsequent recognition that 'it wasn't really far from rape' (245) and Rudi's evasive response to that are equally revealing, demonstrating the prevalence and persistence within Europe of atavistic, macho attitudes to gender and sexuality.[34]

IV

With no prospect of work in view, debts to Christy and Lydia, remorse over his shameful assault on Sophie hanging over him, Lev abandons London and heads off to rural East Anglia, to re-join the ranks of 'the dispossessed' (245), as self-pityingly he tells Rudi. A chance phone-call made by Vitas had opened the possibility of a job in that area, picking vegetables, as thousands of Eastern European migrants have done since 2004.[35] While significantly better than those depicted in Nick Broomfield's film *Ghosts* (2006) and Maryna Lewycka's *Two Caravans* (2007), the conditions in which he and many of his compatriots live are austere, the labour arduous and not well-paid. A positive side to life on the aptly-named Longmire Farm is the companionship he enjoys working alongside Vitas, Jacek, Oskar, Pavel and Karl, which means hearing and speaking 'his own language' (247), but also from the two illegal Chinese workers with whom he shares a caravan, Sonny and Jimmy Ming. Poignantly, in broken, verb-less English, they voice sympathy for Lev when he receives the terrible confirmation from Rudi that Auror will vanish under water:

> 'Rev,' said Sonny Ming, sadly, 'this bad-shit for you. We know. China-side, many dams. Many, many virrige gone. Fuckin' bad-shit''Yah. We know gubman bodies. Lirrel people wipe-out' (260).

Another figure who treats Lev with warmth is his employer, Midge Midgham, who invites him to his house one evening to share an aged bottle of vodka. Familiar themes within the novel crop up in the farmer's conversation, different forms of betrayal, exploitation and decline - domestic, political and economic. After bemoaning his ex-wife's rapaciousness during the divorce process, he reflects on how Communism forced people into 'a blusted straitjecket', before offering a melancholy account of the state of agriculture in Britain: 'Can't

even get people to help me on the land any more – only immigrant labour. The English used to love the land. Specially Suffolk people. Don't know where that love went' (253-4).[36]

Increasingly, from Chapter 18 onwards, however, the text's focus veers away from its preoccupations with 'the condition of England', towards its flawed hero's single-minded mission to transform lives in his home region. His mother's is one of a clamour of voices calling him back, her refusals to contemplate quitting their village causing him nightmares. From Maya and then Rudi, he discovers how the Tchevi's dire, immobile state reflects their own. Conscious of the pressures Lev is facing and his family's plight, the Mings and Midge treat him with kindness and consideration; the brothers help him maintain his work-rate in the fields, while the farmer buys him with a brand-new mattress so that he can at last sleep soundly (260-1). While seeking a way through his own 'sea of troubles', the book Lydia had thoughtfully given him continues to keep him afloat, while at the same time enhancing *The Road Home*'s self-reflexive dimension.

On cue, following his latest meditations on *Hamlet*, Lev receives a phone call from Lydia, who has only just learnt of the dam project. She is a fount of sensible advice, urging Lev to send Rudi fifty pounds to bribe officials allocating housing in Baryn. In conveying Pyotr's and her conviction that the dam will bring great prosperity to the town, including 'New businesses... New housing…Smart cafes and shops' (265), she helps germinate the seed that blossoms into Lev's 'Great Idea'. As so often before, she functions as an agent who generates change in the protagonist's thinking, an energising force who translates herself and transforms him.

Significantly, in terms of the text's western origin, idyllic, timeless, rural England serves as the catalyst in the reconfiguration of the eastern migrant's imagination. Poetic, almost Keatsian images gather in the run-up to his epiphany, anticipations of an abundance ahead. Early morning finds the farmer picking up

> straw bales for the summer fruit…Poplars bordered the lane, their leaves flashing grey in the sunshine. At the feet of the poplars, swathes of damsel's lace. And Midge nearly let the tractor swerve, his eyes were so fixed on this sight.
>
> 'Worth the winter,' he said. 'Eh, Lev? Worth all the dark days to see that.
>
> Lev looked at the white embroidery on a flounce of May green. He let his gaze wander there, in its fragility and in its permanence…The Idea was beautiful (265-6).

What exactly this Idea entails is for a while withheld from the reader, though its effects are soon apparent. Suddenly the protagonist begins to act like a writer, 'dreaming everything into existence', his mind filled with 'audacious tasks and hopes' (266), his notebook filling up with illegible scribbles.

Despite suffering the effects of a hangover on the morning after his forty-third birthday, Lev begins the day full of purpose. Outside he witnesses a revival afoot, raspberry canes 'coming into leaf', 'diminutive violets pushing up among the new grass' (268), frail natal symbols for the discerning reader. He rings Christy to announce his intention to return immediately to the metropolis, the only realistic place in which he can amass the capital necessary for his grand plan. With the switch back to London, the novel's action accelerates. Within days, Lev secures a job as a waiter at a Greek taverna in affluent Highgate, thanks to Christy's recommendation. To the restaurant's owner, Lev's 'foreign' complexion is an asset since he is keen to pass him off as a Greek. Like GK, Panno is a savvy operator, fully attuned to his British clients' needs. What they gain from dining at his premises, he maintains, is a form of release or translation, a taste of 'a totally different order'.[37] By closely observing food preparation in the kitchen and how people are catered for front-of-house, Lev continues to extend his knowledge of cuisine and its display, impressing his new employer.[38] In another sign of the respect the migrant's diligence inspires, shortly after Lev's return to London his old boss consents to an hour-long meeting. To his amazement and delight, GK responds enthusiastically to the daring idea of opening up his own restaurant in Baryn. The chef provides a precise breakdown of the decisions that will need to be made with regard to '*Style of Cuisine*', '*Costings*', '*Supply*', '*Look*', and '*Setting-up Cost*' (281-2), and, in a follow-up session, estimates that Lev would need to accrue a minimum of £14,000 to realise the Great Idea (295). Registering the dismay these figures provoke ('Lev was silent, staring'), GK suggests that £10,000 might be sufficient, if he were to buy some equipment second-hand.[39]

That Lev regards both as utterly impossible sums illustrates the enduring burden of his ideological conditioning. In Central and Eastern Europe throughout the Communist-era the emphasis on *collective*, not individual expectations and aspirations had a detrimental effect on the young especially. As they moved through the education system, they would invariably encounter teachers who were far keener at identifying flaws and weaknesses in students' work than conferring praise and encouragement for their efforts. Not surprisingly, therefore, self-denigration and low self-esteem were commonplace, which explains why Lev succumbs so easily to defeatism, dismissing his project as 'a thing of no substance', 'an absurd, arrogant fantasy' (296, 299), and himself as 'a Failure' (297).

Characteristically, when confronted with difficulties, he reverts to his usual strategy which is to seek directions and solutions from an external source. Unaware that she is in New York and that it is five in the morning, he calls the ever-reliable Lydia. The dyspepsia from which she is suffering is a result of the excess and affluence she has become accustomed to. Ironically, the early part of her conversation is larded with references to fine dining, yet when Lev outlines his dream of opening a quality restaurant in Baryn, she dismisses the idea as 'completely, utterly crazy' on the grounds that 'Our people don't care about good food. They never have' (300). When finally the penny drops and she realises that Lev is making a pitch for Maestro Greszler's investment in the scheme, Lydia is outraged and castigates his approach as 'atrocious', 'wretched', 'despicable' (301).

Another instance of the novel's critical representation of the migrants' homeland occurs when, at the suggestion of Jasmina, Christy's new partner, Lev pays a visit to his country's London Embassy. Having had first-hand experience of his accomplishments as a cook, Jasmina urges him to examine the possibility of securing a business loan, given the EU policy of fostering new enterprises. From the narrator's ominous description of the embassy building, the reader is forewarned that there is little likelihood of Lev's request being positively received. Although outwardly the structure is attractive and inviting, inside it reflects the state Lev left, an uncanny place trapped in its past:

> The embassy occupied a tall, white-stuccoed house not far from Earl's Court Road, where Lev had once worked for Ahmed. Though the exterior paintwork…was fresh, the entrance hall *overwhelmed* Lev with its *unaccountable darkness*, its scent of things *neglected*. This *darkness and neglect* seemed both *unnervingly familiar* and yet shockingly out of place…Lev saw that a *yellowing notice* on the wall instructed visitors to report to Reception.. The drapes at the tall windows…were partially drawn across the bright summer's day. (306: my emphases).

Inside, a cluster of dark-suited men at a bar look up briefly, before dismiss him as 'a person of no account'. The very correct English of the embassy receptionist reminds him immediately of Lydia's, rendering him 'mute by memory and guilt' (307). Over the course of the exchanges that follow, her manner towards him becomes increasingly brusque and officious, exactly as it would have been in the Communist period. Lest we miss the satirical point about the uncivil service Eastern European embassies continue to provide for their own and other citizens, the text shows the receptionist having no qualms about keeping Lev waiting, while conducting an intimate and inane telephone conversation with one of her beaux. Closing the embassy door, stepping outside and into the sunlight, Lev glances up to observe his country's

flag which hanging ‘lifeless from a white pole'. It is left to the reader to recognise this as emblematic of the stasis which for so long held his nation and its people back.

Tremain’s locating of the embassy in the very same area where Lev once distributed leaflets enables her to re-introduce the character whose generosity and trust helped him get started; Ahmed, the kebab-shop owner. In so doing, she casts light on the prejudice and intolerance currently targeted at migrants from the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent. Ahmed relates how his business went into a steep decline following the July 2007 London bombings. In the wake of those atrocities, he laments, the white British population regard anyone with a darker skin as a potential terrorist.[40] His ambitions in coming to Britain years ago correspond to Lev’s now, as he poignantly explains: ‘…it was my dream, this. To have my own place. To have my name on the window’. When Lev attempts to talk about the costings for his restaurant in Baryn, Ahmed quickly stops him, and concludes their meeting with a curt indictment of western capitalism and the backlash it has provoked: ‘Everything in the world comes down to money. That’s why people love religion all over again. They’re sick of the sound of the abacus’ (312).

Ultimately, a combination of intensive effort and sheer good fortune brings about Lev’s success in accumulating the funds to realise his dream. In a second reminder of how inauspiciously his migrant life began, he revisits the basement steps of Kowalski ‘s yard where he had once passed the night, and first sensed ‘the scent of happiness in this city’ (312). Moments later he receives a call on his mobile which dramatically sets his project back on course. Ferndale Heights’ Mrs McNaughton initially asks whether he could step in to prepare Sunday lunch at the care home, as their regular cook, the Dickensianly-named Mrs Viggers, had disappeared without warning.[41] Given the residents’ appreciative response to his cooking, and his own urgent need to maximise his earnings, he offers to work as full-time chef at the Heights for £20 an hour, seven days a week, which, he calculates will help him raise the £10,000 he requires within four to five months (323).

Along with this emphasis on the economic benefits he derives from working at the home, the narrative stresses the huge *personal* satisfaction Lev gets from his new role. Befittingly, he buys a set of chef’s whites, not for his own self-aggrandisement - the narrator informs us - but as a way of signalling to residents that ‘they were being cared for’ (323), respectfully and professionally. A character who shares his attitude to the elderly and makes working there a pleasure is Simone, Lev’s sassy black teenage assistant. With Lev, she is unfailingly and refreshingly candid, welcoming his use of fresh ingredients and the hygiene he brings to the kitchen. She proves a great hit with the residents, especially after they

encounter her extravagantly-worded menu choices, promising such delights as '*Wickedly lovely free-range chicken*', '*Chef's fantastic fish gratin with zero bones*', and '*Bloody delicious vegetarian sausages with the non-packet-shit mash*' (325). The piquancy of her language lifts spirits and add savour to the dishes, we are told.

Working at the Heights also enables Lev to renew acquaintance with Ruby Constad, the resident to whom he had been introduced by Sophie, and who constantly proved herself 'the heartiest welcomer'.[42] His relationship with Ruby is grounded in mutual empathy, respect for and recognition of otherness, qualities markedly absent from his turbulent relationship with Sophie. When towards the novel's close, cancer finally tightens its grip, he visits Ruby in the Catholic-run hospice, and finds himself awed by the dignity and grace with which she faces death. Her final act of generosity, the bequest of £3000, gives him with the means to take the road home sooner than he might have otherwise.

Prior to his parting meeting with Ruby, Lev's anxieties about the situation at home had been exacerbated by a distressing phone conversation. Drunken, despairing, Rudi berates Lev for 'tantalising' them with vague promises about a scheme that will save them. The resentment and jealousy Rudi directs towards his migrant friend is not untypical of those who have been left behind in several senses, but none the less hurtful for that. For the reader, who has been witness to Lev's steady moral rehabilitation since the inexcusable assault on Sophie, Rudi's accusations are unjustified; he has not become ' like everybody who goes to the West' and 'turned into a selfish bastard' (330). What Lev dreads most, however, is the thought that he might really be forgotten by those he loves most and who have helped shape and define who he is.

V

The penultimate chapter captures with remarkable insight the uncanny sensations experienced by migrants frequently on their return. Not having alerted anyone of his intentions, and still stung by Rudi's jibes, Lev arrives 'a stranger in a world newly strange to him', 'a ghost' (337, 339). Whereas certain features of the home landscape are familiar ('abandoned farms, silent factories, deserted coal depots'), others reflect change ('new high-rise flats and the bright flickering heartbeats of American franchises'). A problem here and elsewhere, however, is the way the text reinforces the binary opposites and stereotypes that too often simplify east-west political and economic discourse, pitting 'the dark rockface of Communism' with 'the seductive, light-filled void of the liberal market' (337). The idea that

since the collapse of the Soviet Empire individual countries in Eastern Europe might have evolved and ceased to be merely 'remote and backward places' (29) is missing from *The Road Home*. And had Tremain assigned a real name to Lev's homeland and conveyed some sense of its history, it might have seemed less of an imagined construct.[43]

Only at the novel's close do we encounter substantial alterations afoot, symbolised by the sight of a steel crane 'rising above the trees', accompanied by the '*wump-wump-wump-wump*' (338) of the pile-driver. Lev's heart-beat soon attunes itself to these new rhythms, as he intends to become an agent and beneficiary of change. Conscious of how much her readers are anticipating the intensely emotional moment when Lev will be reunited with his daughter and mother, the author delays it. Instead of the scenario *he* - and we - had pictured of 'Maya rushing forward to fling her arms round him', Tremain presents a scene which threatens to fulfil Lev's worst fears of rejection. Just as he reaches a pivotal point on the road where at 'any moment now his own house would come into view', he hears a rumbling, lumbering sound, that of the Tchevi climbing the incline. Once more it reveals the writer's skill in shuttling between exterior and interior perspectives, continually heightening, arresting and releasing tension:

> Lev was about to raise an arm in greeting, but his arm felt heavy at his side, so he just stayed where he was and waited for the moment when Rudi would recognise him. Now the car slowed a little, but it was only a tiny diminution of its speed, a mark of courtesy to a stranger passed on the road. It didn't stop, but drove on by…
>
> His friend had seen him and driven on, driven away! Lev turned in the direction of the Tchevi, raised both his arms in a gesture of despair, saw the brake-lights come on, saw it slide to a halt…Lev wanted to say Rudi's name, tried to say it, but found he was unable to speak (339-40).

The tropes of exile as death, of return as redemption, are played out in Rudi's blasphemous comments in his kitchen, when he compares himself to 'a heartbroken old apostle' (340), and talks of Lev appearing out of his tomb. His questions 'So what happens now?' and 'What happens next?' mirror the reader's uncertainty concerning the novel's outcome. Through the good offices of the third-person narrator, an account is given to Rudi and Lora of the history of Lev's vision for a restaurant, ending with his lofty declaration that 'he was going to ameliorate the lives of every citizen in Baryn' (341). Accepted, reintegrated - or so it seems - the returnee displays a new calmness and authority, and, with the generosity Lydia once showed him, promises to pass on to Lora everything he learnt from his masters.

Although jokingly, at the end of his time with Rudi and Lora, he refers to himself as his mother's 'Prodigal Son', Lev is fully aware that gaining forgiveness from her for forsaking Auror and his filial responsibilities may be extremely problematic. And so it proves. A consequence of his time abroad is that he has come to view his village as a western European - or a British novelist? - might, as somewhere beyond the pale, 'a place so lonely, so abandoned by time, that it was right to drown it, right to force its inhabitants to leave their dirt roads… and join the twenty-first century world' (344). Complementing this 'present'/ 'past', 'there'/ 'here' binarist vision, the description of the family home's interior pitches the brand-new gifts brought from Britain for Maya and Ina against the dated plastic flowers and the coldness of the maternal space. As his daughter and mother walk up the path towards the house and its unseen 'guest', their voices are characterised respectively as 'light as an elf's' and as 'a low, anxious growl' (344). Divisions persist in the contrast between his daughter's delirious joy at seeing her father, and the tight intimate embrace that ensues, and the image of Ina standing apart, 'keeping her anger intact' (345), her eyes 'smaller', literally and metaphorically. 'You've put on weight' is her only remark on being reunited with her son, and throughout the episodes that follow she persists with this taciturnity. The absence of maternal warmth she displays helps illuminate her son's psychological frailties, the low self-esteem, the self-destructive tendencies, the attraction to substitute mother-types, the outbursts of uncontrollable rage.

A major strength in the novel's ending is the way it eschews neat resolutions, reducing the prodigal's return into a comforting parable. Twenty pages before the close, Tremain teasingly introduces the waitress, Eva, whose beauty and 'seductive' (347) charm instantly remind Rudi and Lev of Marina's. Faced with the bold, isolated statement that 'Lev went to Eva's bed' (357), most readers will jump to the conclusion that the protagonist is heading for a happy-ever-after. Our anticipations, like Eva's, are thwarted, however. Despite its apparent heralding of new possibilities in New Baryn, the text underlines the past's fierce grip on Lev's decision-making, and how his current thought-processes cannot but be haunted by all that has gone before.

Frankly, but insensitively, Lev confesses to Eva that *all* his energies are directed at making the restaurant succeed, that 'this was the only thing that gave his life meaning'. What he withholds is that her resemblance to Marina makes love-making to her 'like making love to a ghost'. There is another presence blocking his road towards individuation, that of Sophie. The passionate, violent affair with Sophie released him from his self-imposed celibacy after losing his wife, but also inflicted deep psychological weals. A recognition of the need 'to

move forwards, not back' (359) comes with his sudden, dramatic, inspired decision *not* to call the restaurant *Marina*, since that act of naming would admit his thraldom to memory.

In another sign of the change exile has forged in him, he and Rudi react differently to a bizarre, Preece-like artwork exhibited in the new gallery next door, which depicts 'a human torso sliced in half' rotating on a 'circular, mechanised dais'. Where Rudi is outraged that 'some arsehole sculptor' has wasted valuable auto-parts in constructing this assembly, Lev reacts in a curiously measured, reflective way. He answers his own rhetorical question, 'How has anyone ever been able to calculate value?', by referring to 'the price people are prepared to pay' (360).

Though material profits, professional skills, cultural awarenesses were garnered during the time he was living out of place, the experience also exacted a high price. Our last sighting of Lev places him beside the vast reservoir beneath which his 'drowned village' and lost ancestors lie. Aptly, in a text preoccupied with the costs of estrangement, Lev is pictured struggling to resist the dazzling lure of the surface water, to hold back thoughts of what has been forced below in the name of progress. *The Road Home*'s last words significantly do not belong Lev, but to a different stranger: Christy. A measure of the mark the presence of this huge sublime expanse has left on him is his instinctive, flawed attempt to grasp and familiarise its otherness:

> There's something about it that reminds me of Ireland. Something extreme ...Something wild and beautiful and full of woe' (365).

NOTES

[1] Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*. London: Granta , 1999, p.19.
[2] 'A Total Lack of Planning over EU Immigration', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 2014, 1.
[3] *The New Statesman* edition of 12 July 2013 noted that UKIP membership now stood at 30,000.
[4] 'A Total Lack of Planning', 1.
[5] Hugh Muir, 'The Year Ahead: Immigration', *The Guardian* 2, 2 January 2014, 16.
[6] The dedication of Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans* reads 'To the Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers'. In starker colours than *The Road Home*, Lewycka's novel deals with the terrible exploitation of foreign workers on farms and in factories.
[7] Boyd Tonkin, On the Road of Excess', Interview with Rose Tremain, *The Independent*, 15 June 2007.
[8] It is from exchanges with Lydia that we learn of Lev's birthplace in Auror; the loss of his job at the Baryn sawmill; his and his five year-old daughter's financial dependency on his mother's jewellery work (4); his strong friendship with Rudi and the latter's purchase of a Chevrolet (12-15).
[9] What Lydia's creator may not be aware of is the scandalously low salaries received by primary and secondary school teachers in Eastern European countries.
[10] Given the narrator's unflattering description of Lydia's face, dotted 'with moles like

splashes of mud' (1), few readers would anticipate that Lev might become attracted to her.

[11] There is a later reference to this Oedipal dimension to Lev's decision to migrate:

> '...he knew that Stefan was part of the reason he was here in London, that he'd had to defy in himself that longing of his father's to resist change, and he thought: I should feel grateful that the sawmill closed, or I'd be exactly where he was... I'd be enslaved to the lumber yard until I died' (29).

In the case of Lev's mother, it is her religion that induces an attitude of passivity: 'What's the point' of caring about things, she asks, 'when life takes everything away?' (7).

[12] In the course of his first weeks in London, Lev learns how totally inaccurate his friend's assertions are about the cost of living in London: he had told Lev he would be able to manage on £20 a week. He recalls Rudi's boasts about being so much well '*informed* about the world' because of the extensiveness of his reading and research (70).

[13] While taking a break beside a garden where children are playing on the swings, he is approached by a couple of young mothers, who initially assume that he is a paedophile. One of these women concludes that Lev is merely a 'Foreign nutter. Probably harmless', but her friend is unsympathetic to the idea of him staying. Demonstrating the considerable linguistic skills of the majority of Britons, she orders him to 'Pissez-off, right? *Comprendo*?' (42).

[14] See p.266.

[15] First G.K.Ashe's restaurant (65ff), later Panno's taverna (273ff).

[16] Gradually Lev 'was coming to understand that the Irishman's loneliness was nearly as acute as his own' (71)

[17] In response to Sophie's 'Night, Olev', Lev bows politely, and then informs her of his real name (81).

[18] By contrast, Lev is described as longing to be like her lizard tattoo, 'indelible in her, never erased' (135).

[19] Chapter Four, for example, includes brief episodes which present readers with a negative perspectives on contemporary British culture *and* shed light on Lev's psychological state. Shortly before referencing the issues of obesity (54-5) and excessive drinking amongst the young (61-2), Tremain depicts Lev's initial encounter with tabloid photography. The very idea that a *national* newspaper should print a picture of a topless model with 'ridiculous breasts the size of pumpkins' stirs extreme feelings within him that are in no small part attributable to sexual frustration. Disgust turns to violent rage as he contemplates the decadence to which twenty-first century western man has sunk: 'He wished the girl was dead. He wished the person who'd photographed her was dead. He wished copulation had died out…He ground his heel on the picture, to tear it' (47-8). The text goes on to emphasise the sharp distinction in Lev's mind between Marina in her 'clean white blouse' and 'striped pinafore' and this nameless, shameless woman.

[20] A popular television sitcom, screened between 1992 and 2012, *Absolutely Fabulous* was written by Jennifer Saunders, who also played the role of Edina Monsoon. The celebrity-obsessed Edina runs a PR agency and lives a life of excess in which she is joined by fashion editor, Patsy Stone, a part played by Joanna Lumley.

[21] Such is Andy's fame that the wearing of dark glasses is an absolute necessity.

[22] Another equally implausibly-named actor mentioned in the text is Oliver Scrope-Fenton.

[23] Ironically, Sam's gushing over Andy's 'totally ground-breaking' work echoes Sophie's gushing over hers. It emerges that when he first mentioned to Sam his play's title, she confused it with 'piccalilli', a popular dressing for cold meat.

[24] All this is a far cry from the simpler, sparer celebrations back in Auror, where his mother would light candles around a gold icon, and ask 'Jesus and His Mother Mary to bring the family better times'; where 'small gifts in crepe paper' would be deemed sufficient, 'wooden toys for Maya, gloves or scarves for Stefan and Lev'; where 'rich food and heavy drinking' induced the deepest sleep.

[25] A neat emblematic detail, alluded to several times in the text, is how as a schoolgirl Ruby had once formed half of the 'O' in WELCOME when the Viceroy of India visited her convent school.

[26] His racist attitudes are sadly not uncommon in parts of Eastern Europe.

[27] This occurs during the evening of the same day that Lev bade his farewell to Lydia.

[28] See above, note 1.

[29] Elements in Christy's description of Howie's work might encourage one to see links

between the fictional Howie Preece and one of Britain's most well-known conceptual artists, Damien Hirst. Born 1965, Hirst came to prominence between the late 1980s and early1990s, most notoriously for such works as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, in which he exhibited a 14 foot-long tiger shark, immersed in formaldehyde, and *A Thousand Years* which consisted of a rotting cow's head infested by maggots and surrounded by flies. There may be an oblique allusion to the fact that some creations that bear Hirst's name have been produced by artists on his payroll, when Christy makes a damning reference to Preece's exploitation of 'badly paid studio assistants' (191).

[30] One of the most famous epitaphs in literary history can be found in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, and reads, 'Here lies the body of Jonathan Swift, Doctor of Divinity and Dean of this Cathedral, where *savage indignation* can no longer lacerate his heart'.

[31] The idea that the Royal Court would actually commission and stage such a facile work as *Peccadilloes* requires a suspension of disbelief on the readers' part.

[32] As so often before he calls upon the one person who has always come to his aid, Lydia.

[33] 'He was unmoved…He pressed her down…he searched her mouth, he felt her tongue…He hauled her legs up…She was half crying, but not in fear – he could tell, couldn't he?' (241).

[34] 'Men are having a tough time in this century. We just don't seem to know where we fucking are' (245). Earlier in the narrative, Lev compared Sophie to 'some exotic dish that I don't yet know how to make' (176).

[35] The 2011 census revealed that 10% of the population of Boston, a town in Lincolnshire, consists of migrant workers, the majority of them Poles and Lithuanians. http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/dec/11/census-boston-eastern-european-immigration

[36] A BBC documentary, *The Day the Immigrants Left*, broadcast on 24 February 2010, provides confirmation that many farms in East Anglia would be unsustainable, were it not for substantial numbers of Eastern European migrant workers. The town of Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, the location for the programme, had seen an influx of 9,000 migrants following EU enlargement in 2004.

[37] Brian Friel, *Translations*, London: Faber, 1981, p.40.

[38] When Panno observes that 'Not many people from your country interested in good cuisine', Lev blames that on sixty years of eating 'Communist food' (275).

[39] During one of his meetings with the Chef, Lev glimpses Sophie, her face considerably thinner than he remembers. When she is out of hearing, GK confides to Lev that 'Preece leads her a dance. But he gets a lot of important people swilling at my trough, so who am I to complain? (284). That GK is so supportive to Lev and so upfront about how he uses Sophie reinforces my earlier point about the ambivalence of all its main characters. There is no ambiguity, however, in Tremain's damning depiction of moral failings within British society.

[40] 'I'm from Qatar, right? I got nothin' to do with Osama bin Laden or none of those fuckin' fanatics' (311). Not long before his encounter with Ahmed, Lev has himself had a taste of the growing hostility towards migrants when he is mugged by two boys - one white, one black - who denounce him as a 'Fuckin' foreign shi'head', 'Immigrant fuckin' scum' and 'Terrorist'. Following what is a vicious, unprovoked attack, Lev's response strikes this reader as somewhat indulgent: 'They were just poor kids...Poor kids from poor homes' (294).

[41] Albeit briefly, Tremain raises the issue here of physical abuse in the British care home system, when one of the inmates refers to how Mrs Viggers once wrenched her arm out of its socket (317).

[42] W.B. Yeats, 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', in *Yeats's Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares, London: Macmillan, 1989, p.235.

[43] In her Acknowledgements section, Tremain thanks her friend, Jack Rosenthal, for introducing her to 'his Polish field-workers' and their 'true and invaluable tales of Eastern Europe' (367). The novel's portrayal of twenty-first century Britain generally seems so much more authentic, and described with an insider's knowledge.