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The Train to Nowhere: Exploring Spanish and Bulgarian National Decadence through the Metaphor of a Train Journey in Rosa Montero's *La buena suerte* and Elena Alexieva's *Свети Вълк*

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Both Spanish author Rosa Montero's novel *La buena suerte* (*Good Fortune*) (Premio Nacional de las Letras Españolas / National Award for Spanish Letters 2020) and Bulgarian author Elena Alexieva's *Свети Вълк* (*Saint Wolf*) (2018; „13 века България" Роман на Годината / "13 Centuries Bulgaria" Novel of the Year 2019; Национална Награда „Перото" / "Peroto" National Award 2019) begin with a character abandoning a train journey and appearing to metaphorically give up on the journey of life. Ironically, in both cases, it is through a Dantesque descent into a world defined by darkness and decay that the characters are able to rise above the socio-political and economic turmoil that defines their respective nations, and to cultivate a sort of personal happiness for themselves and those around them. In this study, I explore the way in which two award-winning novels, written on opposite ends of the European continent, explore similar themes using parallel metaphors to arrive at resemblant conclusions. I will use ecocritical theory to focus on how both authors use decaying post-industrial towns and other hellish landscapes, animal abuse, and personal tragedy, to create a sort of new hope that emerges from the ashes of pain and suffering. Through their characters and metaphors both authors suggest that, while the world's problems defined by crime, corruption, cruelty, and discrimination may continue, hope endures and that pockets of happiness can be found regardless of circumstances, and it is those pockets that keep humanity living and procreating. Montero's novel sums up the mutual theme at its conclusion, when the speaker reflects that "la alegría es un hábito" (322) / "happiness is a habit."[1]

Rosa Montero was born in Madrid, Spain. She is an award-winning journalist and author, whose work has been translated into more than twenty languages, including Bulgarian. She was the recipient of Spain's Premio Nacional de Periodismo / National Journalism Award for her journalistic endeavors in 1980. Her novel, *La hija del caníbal* (*The Cannibal's Daughter*) received the Premio Primavera de Novela / Primavera

[1] All translations are mine.

Novel Award in 1997, and since then, she has been the recipient of numerous awards for her novels and short stories. In 2024, the author published the short story collection *Cuentos verdaderos* (*True Stories*).

Elena Alexieva was born in Sofia, Bulgaria. She is an award-winning author and playwright whose work has appeared in periodical publications and anthologies in English, German, French, Russian, Polish, and Spanish. She also has been the recipient of numerous awards for her fiction and theater work. Her latest novel, *Вулкан* (*Vulcan* 2023), was selected for the 2024 prize „13 века България" Роман на Годината / "13 Centuries Bulgaria" Novel of the Year, which Alexieva rejected on May 11 of the same year, after finding out there was a conflict of interest among the members of the jury (mediapool.bg).

The train journey is the first trope that we see in both novels. Each character is on a trip with a specific destination. In Alexieva's novel, the protagonist known as "the Traveler," whose name is revealed to be Mehmet towards the novel's conclusion, is headed for the sea. In Montero's novel, the protagonist, Pablo Hernando, is on his way to Málaga, also by the sea, for an architectural conference. In their cultural anthology on train travel, *Trains, Literature, and Culture: Reading and Writing the Rails*, Steven Spalding and Benjamin Fraser point out that "through literary and visual representations, artists have imagined the train as a contradictory symbol of both modern anxiety and potential freedom" (x). Trains are also frequently used as a symbol for life's journey. Both Pablo Hernando and Alexieva's Traveler, Mehmet, terminate this journey early. Pablo Hernando is abandoning this "modern anxiety," while Mehmet is literally abandoning his "potential freedom," as we find out at the novel's conclusion that he is an escapee from a mental institution. Hernando does eventually reach Málaga but takes a bus back to one of the train stations along the way where he purchases an apartment in the fictional town of Pozonegro, a dying town that was once a coal mining center. Mehmet, on the other hand, walks out to relieve himself while the train makes a scheduled stop. He walks off and comes across an illegal coal mining operation in the equally dying city of Pernik, which is not fictional. Neither passenger has a plan, they just abandon their life path. Hernando abandons a career as a prominent architect in Madrid while Mehmet abandons an aimless journey to the sea. Mehmet's actions represent both a figurative and a literal freedom after having been allowed to escape from a mental asylum hidden away in the mountains of Bulgaria, where patients who have been forsaken by society suffer routine abuse and neglect. As each character interrupts their life journey, they find themselves in a seemingly undesirable world of decaying post-industrial towns that were once booming centers of the coal mining industry.

In Montero's novel the post-industrial hellish landscape is the fictional town symbolically named "Pozonegro" / "Septic tank," initially described as "un pequeño pueblo de pasado minero y presente calamitoso, a juzgar por la fealdad suprema del lugar" (12) / "a small town with a mining past and a calamitous present, judging by the supreme ugliness of the place.". The ugliness of the town is directly related to its mining past and implicitly demonstrates the destruction and abuse of the earth, not only through mining, but also through the construction of utilitarian housing and infrastructure at the lowest possible cost to accommodate an industry with no concern for aesthetics, sustainability, or the environment. Montero's text therefore takes an ecocritical stance on the effects of human expansionism into nature and the exploitation of the Anthropocene as defined by Marco Caracciolo, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen, and David Rodriguez:

> We inhabit two spaces at the same time: an abstract planetary space (the Earth) and a concrete embodied space in which we experience the effects of the Anthropocene. A gap thus opens up between the phenomenology of everyday spaces and the wide-ranging changes affecting the planet as a whole. Both spaces disrupt the longstanding dualism that opposes human societies to nonhuman animals and processes (e.g., geological phenomena or the climate). The natural system of the planet is not a stable and self-contained unity but is influenced and challenged by the equally powerful impacts of human expansionism. Likewise, our everyday relationship to natural environments is one of deep entanglement, effectively casting the nonhuman as an active agent resisting mere exploitation. (5)

The nonhuman resistance in Pozonegro appears to have been defeated by human efforts, creating a tiny urban space built around a coal mine for the purpose of profit and exploitation. Once the mine was closed and all the profits absorbed, all that was left were the remains of the utilitarian construction left to slowly erode and decay in what resembles a post-apocalyptic abandon: "De día, Pozonegro es feo, ruinoso y deprimente. De noche es siniestro. Un cementerio urbano lleno de inmuebles muertos: las tiendas clausuradas, las puertas tapiadas, los solares ruinosos" (73) / "By day, Pozonegro is ugly, dilapidated, and depressing. By night, it is sinister. An urban cemetery full of dead real estate: closed-down shops, boarded-up doors, run-down plots of land." The main employer in town is the megastore "Goliat" / "Goliath," which appears to have decimated the local small businesses as is common around the globe under neoliberal capitalism where giant chain stores such as Walmart or Carrefour force the closure of smaller family-owned businesses that cannot compete. A giant megastore on the outskirts of a decaying city is what remains after the land has been plundered for profit and then abandoned, but, as Luis I. Prádanos points out:

> they are no longer perceived as the entrepreneurial heroes who will grow the economy and generate a trickle-down effect making everyone more prosperous, but as unethical plunderers of the Earth who engineered the financial crisis and promoted dysfunctional urban development. They destroyed not only the wealth generated by communities and ecosystems, but also the conditions necessary for the production of wealth in the future. They committed the crime of ecocide against present and future generations of humans and the nonhuman alike. (111)

Prádanos is referencing current petrochemical industries, city developers, and capitalist enterprises that plunder and abandon the land for profit without having learned from similar situations in the past, represented by Pozonegro: "cuando la minería entró en crisis a mediados del siglo XX, Puertollano sobrevivió gracias al complejo petroquímico inaugurado en 1966. Pero Pozonegro se quedó sin nada" / "when the mining crisis hit in the middle of the 20th Century, Puertollano survived thanks to the petrochemical complex inaugurated in 1966. But Pozonegro was left with nothing" (49). The petrochemical industry that is currently plundering not just Spain, but the entire globe, is nothing but a descendent of the coal industry that plundered it in the early twentieth century, and the text shows history repeating itself as human enterprises exploit the earth for profit and with disregard for all that is nonhuman, laying waste to the human labor force by converting them into cheap labor and dooming them to poverty. Michelle Yates points out that:

> Waste also reveals how these contradictions point to the non-sustainability of capitalism, to the natural and historical limits of capital, and toward capitalism's overcoming. On the one hand, how can capital produce use-values (to embody value) if it has laid waste to the environment and natural resources necessary for production? On the other hand, how can capital continue to accumulate, as mediated through the production of value (the dominant form of social wealth in capitalism), if it has rendered labor superfluous, and excreted human labor from the production process? In striving for its own limitless (profit) accumulation, capital drives toward its own natural and historical limits. (1692)

The best (and only) available job in Pozonegro is at the megastore Goliat, representative of all the megastores that have destroyed small businesses worldwide by providing cheap products and offering huge corporate profits and few employee benefits. This is where Pablo accepts low-wage employment once he settles in Pozonegro.

Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of hope. In spite of a devastated environment and depleted resources, the local people have a choice and, one of them, Raluca, has taken on the seemingly impossible task to beautify the town pool with artificial flowers:

> Una pileta grande rectangular, otra cuadrada para niños, implacable cemento por todas partes . . . Ni una brizna verde, ni la menor compasión estética. … hay un arbolito seco como de unos dos metros de altura, el cadáver de una planta joven. En las ramas de la pequeña pelada copa, alguien ha atado media docena de flores artificiales, una en cada ramita, una burda simulación de qué el árbol está vivo. (100)
>
> A large rectangular pool, another small one for the children. Not a single blade of green grass, not the slightest aesthetic compassion . . . there is a small dry tree around two meters tall, the cadaver of a young plant. On the branches of the bare crown, someone has tied half a dozen artificial flowers, one on each branch, a clumsy simulation that the tree is alive.

While her efforts are futile and lead to nothing more than kitsch, Raluca's desire to beautify the world (also manifested through her kitschy art of painting horses) is genuine, and it is up to each individual to choose whether to accept and contribute to global decay or to make a change. Raluca may lack power to make a change, but Pablo does not.

The novel's protagonist has the architectural skills to construct both aesthetically pleasing and environmentally safe housing and has been using those skills for personal gain and in service to the highest bidder, which is usually the corporations driving the destruction of the land. Once Pablo emerges from his self-exile in Pozonegro, he returns to Madrid, along with Raluca, and dedicates himself to constructing houses for the homeless: "está diseñando un sistema de módulos prefabricados que abaratará de manera radical los costes. Cada módulo tendrá terraza cuadrada diseñada de tal modo, que la fachada del edificio parecerá un damero cúbico cuyos perfiles irán cambiando con la luz del sol" (314) / "he is designing a system of prefabricated modulars that will radically reduce costs. Each module will have a square terrace designed in such a way that the building façade will resemble a cubic checkerboard whose contours will alternate with the sunlight." Luis I. Prádanos suggests that "sustainable cities need to be designed not only to be environmentally sound, but also to improve the quality of life and well-being of their inhabitants while promoting justice and equality. Without social equality and cultural plurality, cities are unlikely to

become sustainable" (99). Pablo's new focus moves him further away from the corporate profit mentality in which his early career had submerged him, and into a new environmental mentality designed to improve the cost of living and provide not only shelter in the utilitarian sense, but also an aesthetically pleasing shelter that will work in harmony with nature, uniting the human and the non-human in a posthuman symbiotic relationship, in this case sunlight and the modular constructions.

Alexieva's protagonist also steps off the train into a decaying town that was once an industrial coal mining center, the city of Pernik. In Bulgaria's case, the coal mining was not developed by unbridled capitalism, but by the former leftist dictatorship that placed industrial progress over any and all environmental concerns during the Cold War. Communist governments focused on industrial progress and paid little to no attention to the environment, as can be deduced from disasters such as Chernobyl.[2] After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the arrival of democracy in Bulgaria, neoliberal capitalism took over, accompanied by corruption, poverty, and organized crime. Unlike the fictional Pozonegro, Alexieva's spaces are based on real places, as she explains in an email interview:

> The places in the novel are very real and easily recognizable for the Bulgarian readers. The city is there and so are the mines as well as the village and the mountain, down to the minute detail such as the church in the last part. True, I only had the chance to visit a mine – a mining museum rather, but still a real former mine – after the novel was written. But it turned out I had intuited a lot. And then, writing is not about experiencing or seeing things as they are. Experiencing is not about seeing at all. Nor is knowing. I chose the setting not because it was very familiar – which it certainly is – but because it speaks to me, to the characters and also, hopefully, to the reader at more levels than I myself could figure out.

The mine in Alexieva's imagination, into which the Traveler (as he is known in the first part of the novel) descends, is an abandoned one that has also become the center for much illegal activity on weekends when people take advantage of the unguarded coal to make extra money because their salaries are so low. Many of the weekend miners are professors from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria's most prestigious research institution, such as Ivan Kolimechkov, a professor of astrophysics who remembers the early days of coal mining before others learned of the mine:

> Бяхме само свои хора, от нашия институт, плюс двама от института биофизика, един от полимерите и мъжете на две колежки от литературния. Това бяха щастливи времена. … Ами че с парите, които изкарвахме тогава със скромен добив на въглища в извънработното време, не само избивахме по две-три заплати, ами успяхме да закупим и скъпа апаратура за една от лабораториите в нашия институт. (36)
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> We were all acquaintances from our Institute along with two from the Institute of Biophysics, one from Polymers, and the husbands of two colleagues from Literature. Those were happy times. With the money we made through our meager off-hours coal mining operations, we were able to bring in 2-3 monthly salaries and even purchased equipment for our Institute.

[2] For an excellent study on Marxism and the environment, see John Bellamy Foster.

The fact that selling bags of illegally obtained coal provides a better income than a full professorship in the Institute of Astrophysics of the National Academy of Sciences is significant and points to the state of Bulgarian socio-economic and cultural decay.

Other elements of cultural decay can be seen in the space of the library in a nearby village, where a lonely librarian does her best to keep books circulating by checking them out to fabricated readers, some of whom are buried in the cemetery. Meanwhile, the mayor appropriates library resources and uses them for other means. Brand new bookshelves have disappeared and been repurposed as support material for the village bridge reconstruction. A corrupt mayor looking out for personal gain is responsible, and it becomes clear that he has already sold the village school and plans to sell the library and other major buildings to a development company with plans to open a luxury retirement community for the ultra-rich with a golf course where the mine used to be:

> Селото ни щяло да се превърне в световен старчески рай. Пари щели да потекат. Чуждите държави щели да дават мило и драго да им гледаме старците. Щели да заприиждат милиони. Цялата държава щяла да се напечели веднъж за винаги. Щели да затрупат рудника, нали е в равното, и върху него да построят игрище за голф. А също и басейни, кортове, музеи, кина. За библиотека нищо не пишеше, но сигурно и библиотека ще има. (220)
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> Our village would be transformed into a world-class geriatric heaven. Money would start flowing. Other countries would pay us dearly to watch their elderly. Millions would start flowing in. The whole country would finally profit once and for all. They would fill in the mine since it is on even ground, and build a golf course over it. Also swimming pools, courts, museums, movie theaters. There was no mention of a library, but surely there would be one.

Since it is the librarian speaking, she cannot imagine a luxury resort without a library, but libraries do not bring monetary profit and do not tend to be included in such resorts. The only Bulgarians that would be included would be the ultra-rich, and those who sell their village houses to the development company for the right to reside at the luxury retirement village. For the rest of the Bulgarians, they can only hope to be employed as cheap labor and provide sanitary services for those with money. Here we see the economic inequality that exists between nations. Bulgaria has become a luxury destination for poorer tourists from wealthy nations due to the lower costs of living: "Те са луксозни старци, не като нашите. Хубаво се обличат и не ядат какво да е. Подмладяват се. В далечните светове, посред чуждата бедност, със своите пет стотинки се разпореждат като царе" (217) / "They are luxury elderly, not like ours. They wear nice clothes and don't just eat whatever. They get younger. In distant lands, among the poverty of others, with their own five cents they act like kings." Bulgaria's elderly tend to exist on meager pensions that often force them to choose between food and heat, unless they have relatives that provide additional support. Travel and clothing become luxuries. Meanwhile, people from nations with higher standards of living can come to Bulgaria and take advantage of lower prices, living like "kings" on the back of Bulgaria's economic decay. A retirement community for the elderly of the West is precisely what the village mayor envisions. Not only would such a community exclude most Bulgarians, it would also destroy the cultural and natural beauty and biodiversity of the region. Prádanos talks about the

phenomenon of luxury resorts as a similar reality in Spain: "The more successful these resorts become, the faster they deplete the biodiversity and cultural diversity they intend to commodify, and the more tourists learn to enjoy technologically mediated 'nature', the faster its biodiversity disappears" (108). Transforming an entire Bulgarian village into a retirement community would have the same effect on the local culture and biodiversity.

Whereas the mine is originally the spot in which human profit becomes the cause of physical damage to the land, it is also a representation of the Earth's resilience as it welcomes and cradles those who would abuse it, providing comfort and shelter and uniting all into one. It is the antithesis of the luxury resort in that it welcomes all and teaches them how to live on little:

> Под земята има място за всички. Хората, като дойдат тук, отначало се плашат, а после, някак странно се успокояват и дори им става хубаво. Изведнъж разбират, че могат и съвсем малко да карат. Мъничко местенце, мъничко въздух – и се нагаждат. Отпуска им се душичката. После не щат да си ходят. Абе голям рахат. Ей в тия ниши настаняваме придружителите – майки с деца, старци и други нуждаещи се. Ние също почиваме в тях като се уморим. … У дома, на анатомичния матрак, сън не ме лови. А тука, на голата пръст, спя като къпан. И не е само заради труда.
> . . .
> Няма нужда дори да заспивам. Полежа, полежа, и всичко ми минава. А тя ме стиснала в утробата си и ме държи. Не ме пуска. Ела, казва ми, човече нещастно, да се влееш в общия живот. Аз ще изцедя от теб твоя личен живот, който никога не съм ти дала, и ще го влея в общия, защото животът е общо благо, не частна собственост. (42-43)
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> Under the ground there is room for all. When people first come here, they are initially scared, but then they strangely somehow calm down and even feel good. They suddenly realize they can do with very little. A tiny space, a little bit of air – and they adjust. They don't need more. Their soul relaxes. Some don't want to leave. It's pure bliss. In these here niches we accommodate the companions – mothers with children, the elderly, and other people with needs. We also rest here when we get tired. … At home, on the anatomical mattress, I have trouble sleeping. But here, on the naked earth, I sleep like a baby.
> . . .
> I don't even need to fall asleep. I lie down for a bit and everything starts to feel better. And she holds me tightly in her womb. She won't let me go. Come here, she says, miserable man, to flow into the collective life. I will squeeze the personal life, which I did not give to you, out of you and pour it into the collective, because life is a collective good, not private property.

The earth here is personified and the mine becomes a womb that gives new life, ending greed and consumerism and uniting humans with nature. Earth heals those who would harm her, becoming what some ecocritics refer to as "Gaia," when they claim that "the planet has been so thoroughly altered physically and chemically by living things that the Earth itself has to be seen as a kind of super-organism. Rather than merely being a rock in space with life clinging to it, the non-living parts of the planet are as much a part of the whole as the non-living heartwood of a living tree" (Garrard 200). In this text, it is precisely in the mines, where humans have inflicted damage on the Earth, that the Earth welcomes humans back and

provides physical and emotional healing free of charge. It heals people of their consumerism and connects them to each other and to itself, while the luxury resorts and spas promise the same, but exclusively for those who can afford them.

Nevertheless, some continue to abuse the Earth for profit. While Kolimechkov and his colleagues are mining to supplement their meager income, an organized crime boss known as Versace has taken over the other end of the mine. Versace abuses his own people, including children, in order to reap large amounts of coal without sharing the profits. Because those profits are not growing as fast as he would like, Versace orders explosive devices to be used for faster and more lucrative profits. The explosives are unsafe and cause tunnel collapses. Not only is the mine collapsing, but so are the foundations of the houses on the surface. People's homes are being destroyed for profit on a literal level, while on a metaphorical level the collapse is representative of the way in which organized crime is destroying Bulgarian society.[3]

Rather than live in a crime-ridden, depleted country, where even top researchers have to supplement their meager income, many Bulgarians choose to immigrate and settle in the West. This depletion of human resources is evident in the fact that many of the village inhabitants are older and have been abandoned by their children. Kolimechkov's own son is studying abroad, and Kolimechkov has not seen him in person for years. As the novel progresses and Kolimechkov loses his own job at the Academy due to his institute being deemed "non-essential," he is abandoned by his wife, who moves to live with the son. The mother's migration to the country where the son is studying highlights that the son plans to stay in the new country past the end of his studies, and, as Mikolaj Stanek points out: "The data on family reunification processes provide some clues to the migratory patterns related both to return and duration of stay. The fact that the family members move to the migratory destination may indicate that the immigrant plans are medium or long term; we can assume there is no regrouping if the intention is to return immediately" (1637).

Although Stanek's claim can be applied to any nation, Stanek is specifically talking about Bulgarian and Romanian immigration patterns to Spain, which has been a primary destination for migrants from both Balkan nations. In fact, the character of Raluca in Montero's novel is of Romanian origin, although she was abandoned at birth and only knows of her heritage through her name, which was left in a note along with the abandoned baby on a park bench. Raluca's character becomes representative of the difficulties faced in Spain by Romanian immigrants (and those of other nations), whose living conditions and hardships led them to the difficult choice of abandoning a newborn baby in the hopes that the baby will have a better life, which does not happen in Raluca's case. She grows up in a group home and develops severe mental illness due to her trauma, spending time in a mental institution.

The mental health crisis that results from a devastated money-driven society defined by corruption and greed is central to both novels. Raluca's experience with the Spanish mental health system has labeled her as dangerous, and, as soon as she performs an act of violence trying to defend a child from abuse by his older brother, she is institutionalized again and Pablo has to use his connections to secure her release. Montero's concern with mental health is a leitmotiv over several of her works. In *La loca de la casa* (*The Madwoman of the House*), she describes herself as a fictional author,

[3] For a detailed report on organized crime in Bulgaria, see "Bulgaria" in *The Global Organized Crime Index.*

observing a mental hospital and imagining what it would be like to enter it:

> Esa pequeña proyección de mí misma se quedó allí, en el Centro de Salud Mental, a mis espaldas, mientras yo seguía con mi utilitario por la calle camino del almuerzo, pensando en cualquier futilidad, tranquila e impasible tras ese espasmo de visión angustiosa que resbaló sobre mi cuerpo como una gota de agua. Pero, eso sí, ahora ya sé cómo es internarse en un centro psiquiátrico; ahora lo he vivido, y si algún día tengo que describirlo en un libro, sabré hacerlo, porque una parte de mí estuvo allí y quizá aún lo esté. Ser novelista consiste exactamente en esto. (30)
>
> A small projection of myself stayed there, at the Center for Mental Health, behind my back, while I went on with my utilitarian path, down the street towards lunch, thinking about any possible futility, calm and tranquil after the spasm of the anguished vision that ran across my body like a drop of water. But now I know what it is like to intern oneself in a psychiatric center: I have now lived it, and if I one day have to describe it, I will know how to do so because a part of me was there and perhaps still is. Being a novelist is exactly about this.

In *La buena suerte*, Montero once again visits that mental hospital, and she later writes a whole book on the theme of mental health, *El peligro de estar cuerda* (*The Danger of Being Sane*). Like Montero, Alexieva is concerned with mental health, and has experienced the state of facilities by serving as an interpreter:

> The theme of insanity – or rather of 'mental otherness' as I'd rather put it – has always been close and of interest to me. Which is not something new or highly original. After all, art and madness are the two sides of the same coin and art without madness definitely lacks something – authenticity, courage, despair, truthfulness, you name it. In my case however I also happen to have a rather long history of first-hand observation of the Bulgarian mental health system, working as an interpreter for a large international organization dealing with people in various forms of detention and the conditions they live in. So I daresay I've seen a lot. Disappointing as it may be, not much of what comes out in the novel along this line is metaphorical, to say the least. ("The Questions")

Alexieva goes on to admit that her protagonist, Mehmet, was inspired by a real person she met during her time as an interpreter. In both novels, the characters who supposedly suffer mental problems become salvation figures for those around them, teaching them that happiness does not reside in circumstances. As Montero says in a presentation of the book uploaded to *YouTube*, "[la novela] se convirtió en una historia de supervivencia y una historia de redención y en una historia de regeneración" / "[the novel] turned into a story about survival, a story about redemption, and a story about regeneration."

Raluca, having been abandoned as a baby, sees her circumstance as "good luck" – hence the title of the novel. Even when she suffers abuse at the hands of a boyfriend, Raluca proclaims, "¡Qué suerte! Yo es que siempre he tenido muy buena suerte, ¿sabes? Y menos mal que soy así de afortunada, porque, si no, con la vida que he tenido, no sé qué hubiera sido de mí" (193) / "What luck! Turns out I have always had good luck. It's a good thing I am fortunate like this, because, if not, with the life I have had, I don't know what would have happened to me." This "luck" results in Raluca permanently losing an eye, but she counts it

as "good luck" because she did not have to suffer through the eye removal process thanks to anesthesia, choosing to focus on the bright side. Raluca is a prime example of an individual surviving and thriving in spite of personal and social currents that would doom her. She may only have a job at a megastore, but she is proud of that job, and she sees all through a lens of optimism and dedicates herself to her low-wage job at Goliat while painting her kitschy horses and trying to beautify the town through her artificial flowers.

Similarly, the character of Paúncho (Паунчо), the Roma child who loses a leg due to Versace's illegal mining practices and the catastrophic collapse that results from them, is a sign of unbridled optimism in the face of horrendous socio-cultural circumstances. Instead of becoming bitter, Paúncho is happy in his wheelchair and feels blessed because he was able to marry the equally underage Evita, receive a state pension, get a house as a gift from Versace, and he and Evita were able to sire a child. In fact, when commenting on his circumstances, Paúncho says "Ами то ние сме си за завиждане" (306) / "Well, actually, we should be envied." The character should feel victimized by both his direct and indirect oppressors that caused him to lose use of his legs. Instead, he chooses to focus on the microcosm of his and Evita's family and the new baby that was born from there. He, much like Raluca, sees the misfortune of losing his legs (like Raluca losing her eye) as a sign of good luck and one that others would envy.

In Montero's novel, Pablo finds Raluca as an escape from his previous life circumstance, which was defined by the violence performed by his son. This is an act of random violence that seems unrelated to socio-economic structures, but Pablo's son is responsible for the arson of a building and the death and suffering of the innocent victims that were present. In fact, what motivates Pablo's retreat into Pozonegro is an attempt to escape the fact that he has fathered a monster. He still relives the crime, and revisits a series of violent actions which are true crimes that have happened worldwide that interrupt the narration throughout the novel. Crime is a part of society as is violence; they do not always go hand in hand with the neoliberal capitalist abuses on the system, but they are a symptom of a society in disrepair. Nevertheless, repair seems possible on the basic, personal level.

Much like Paúncho and Evita find happiness and are able to procreate, many other characters in both novels find parallel joys. Pablo and Raluca are expecting at the end of Montero's novel. The Traveler impregnates a character named Polene (who is an American witness protection participant) and passes her along to the former Kalimechkov, who, having been abandoned by his wife and child undergoes a transformation and is now known as Bayrakov, the self-named Orthodox priest who purchased his robes at the thrift store and decided to live without a formal income. His family has abandoned him as has his job. He is no longer a scientist in a top institution, but a fake priest, which signifies his abandonment of all money-making endeavors. He actually purchases a used taxi cab and offers free rides to clients until the other cab drivers organize to beat him up, at which point he abandons everything and everyone. Polene has also been abandoned by her own reality. Even though she grew up in the United States, she was exiled because she became involved with a criminal. She settles in Bulgaria, learns the language, connects with Bayrakov, and the two of them set out to build a church. Mehmet the Traveler shows up and helps with the building process. He and Polene end up having a sexual but non-emotional relationship. In the end, Bayrakov/Kolimechkov settles down with her and implicitly accepts responsibility for the offspring, which, much like Raluca and

Pablo's child, will have to survive in a world still defined by corruption. No social problem is fixed, but the individual characters go into survival mode and continue attempting to thrive in spite of their circumstances.

While Montero's characters overcome difficulties and are allowed to thrive at the end of the novel, Alexieva's Mehmet only serves as a catalyst for change and is ultimately forced back into the mental hospital from which he was allowed to escape. On his journeys, however, Mehmet is able to inspire joy and momentary happiness in couples such as Evita and Paúncho, and he is also able to facilitate unions between the local librarian and the village goatherd, and, most importantly, he is able to give hope for the future to those around him. By impregnating Polene and inviting Bayrakov to become her partner, Mehmet fulfills his last role as savior and is able to return to his mental asylum, where he is another type of savior, serving as a parental figure to the other patients.

In order to become a savior figure, Mehmet needs to sacrifice himself, but he does not do so for his fellow humans. Instead, he offers himself up and is almost killed in an effort to save the local wolves from a mindless hunt staged so that the Bulgarian President can have a wolf killing trophy in the hopes he will facilitate the sale of an entire village to a developer who plans to create a luxury retirement home. By becoming one with the wolves and sacrificing himself for them, Mehmet enters into the realm of the posthuman and merges himself with the wolf, which he literally does in the novel. Others assume he is a corpse, but this almost lifeless body merges with the corpses of the dead wolves and there is a blood exchange. The novel's title, *Saint Wolf,* suggests that the biggest sacrifice performed is the one that leads to saving the life of an innocent animal from mindless human violence motivated by financial profit. Rosi Braidotti sees this move away from anthropocentrism and calls it "becoming animal" as she affirms that "post-anthropocentrism displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for 'Man' as the measure of all things. In the ontological gap thus opened, other species come galloping in" (67). In this case, the other species is a wolf, and the Traveler mixes his blood with that of the dead wolves in order to save at least one of the wolves destined to die in the capitalistic game of prize hunting. Likewise, but to a lesser extent, Pablo saves a puppy whose mother has been abused and murdered. In both cases, animal and human boundaries are crossed and the salvation of one species leads to the salvation of the other. In Pablo's case, he reluctantly adopts the dog named "Perra"/ "She-dog," for lack of imagination. In Mehmet's case, he actually takes the place of a wolf in the shooting, sacrificing his own life for that of a fellow creature.

In conclusion, the two novels written on opposite sides of the European continent share an ecocritical concern in common. One was written to describe a post-communist neo-liberal capitalist society while the other describes a post-Franco neoliberal capitalist society. In both cases, the environment is abused for the purposes of personal or corporate gain, creating a hellish landscape and difficult living conditions. In Bulgaria's case the setting is an abandoned coal mining town that is slated to become a mega resort in which the local population will serve tourists from richer countries, while in Spain's case it is an abandoned coal mining town with no future prospects. It is interesting that both sides of the political spectrum eventually end in neoliberalism and destruction. Both novels start out with an interrupted train journey leading to an abandoned coal town. Each protagonist goes on his own search. One finds happiness by forgetting his past, marked by personal violence and capitalist endeavors, and embracing a new path towards sustainability. The other helps his fellow

humans to overcome the violence in their own past and survive in a society destroyed by organized crime, corruption, and capitalism, and focus on the daily bliss of family existence. The characters in both novels come to realize with Raluca that "la alegría es un hábito" (322) / "happiness is a habit." While society is busy destroying the earth through imposed socio-political systems, individual humans survive and create hope for future generations.

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