



# Worlding in Georgi Gospodinov's *There, where we are not*

Mihaela P. Harper<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article proposes that rather than a concern with safeguarding a national identity, Georgi Gospodinov's poetry collection *There, where we are not* (2016) exposes the relationship of self and world as coextensive and mutually constitutive. His poems undertake the remaking of the world as they reconfigure the self with language at the heart of this undertaking—words and meanings in flux, at play in bringing forth selves through a plurality of multitemporal, decentered worlds. Heeding Pheng Cheah's critique that the "world" in world literature discourse has received little attention, I take up Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the "singular plural" to illuminate and further the argument that Gospodinov's collection *worlds* by juggling a multiplicity of specific geographic locations and attending to the plural singularity of a moment, of an event or rather of a *non-event*. In a section titled, *The Sundays of the world*, "there where we are not" becomes a plurality of worlds, singular and shared, uninhabited and teeming with life, worlds observed and observing, worlds that have familiar names—Berlin, Vienna, Ljubljana, Paris, Rome, Kraków, Sofia—and yet each makes up "a world crammed full of absences." Ultimately, the collection neither recedes into the national nor dissipates into the global but seeks out a path in-between through which to world laterally, anew.

**Keywords** Worlding · World literatures · Jean-Luc Nancy · Georgi Gospodinov · Pheng Cheah · National · Bulgarian literature

The tension between the national and the world, the local and the global has long been at the crux of conceptions of world literature. What the majority of these conceptions assume, however, is not only the national or local as a stable space but also, by extension, the givenness of its character. And so, too, with the "world" in the term "world literature," a term that has become the subject of much debate over the last few decades. Defined in opposition to the geographic and geometric solidity of the local or the national, "the world" is reduced to a material entity upon which

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✉ Mihaela P. Harper  
mharper@bilkent.edu.tr

<sup>1</sup> Bilkent University, Main Campus, G Building, Office # 224, Ankara 06800, Turkey

subjective values, the product of rational human thought, are imposed. According to this model, literature is only capable of representing the national character that is then to be categorized and slotted into its respective place within the single, already pre-mapped globe. Such “oneworldness,” Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl argue, is a problematic aspect of a number of major theories of world literature, understood “as a concept, field of study, or institutional framework” (2017, p. 2). They observe that Pascale Casanova’s framing of the term, for instance, reinforces the problem of marginalizing certain national literatures by employing a center/periphery model, a point that Galin Tihanov clarifies in a discussion of the equivalent major/minor model, in accordance with which minor literature ends up meaning “‘small, derivative, deprived of originality, benighted, lagging behind,’ a literature that is worth reading only in order to corroborate or amplify already available superior examples of (European) civilization” (2020, p. 260). Such has been the case of Bulgarian literature, often seen as striving for a place on *the* “world stage,” measuring itself against major European literary works, authors, and movements but also, simultaneously, resisting and denouncing the necessity for and benefits of this approach in the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, and even twenty-first centuries. In the words of Boyko Penchev, “In the last 150 years, the shifts between two imperatives—that of ‘catching up’ to Europe and that of getting ‘back to the native roots of Bulgarian-ness’—have formed the internal dynamics of Bulgarian literature” (2020, p. 81).<sup>1</sup> The comparison to the “world” and the sense of deficiency that it provoked in nineteenth-century Bulgaria, Alexander Kiossev argues, resulted in “self-colonization,”<sup>2</sup> an effect that endured throughout the twentieth century. Thus, the relation to the world (primarily in the form of European advancements in a variety of areas) shaped the conception of the Bulgarian “national soul” or character profoundly.

And yet, this national character is, historically and culturally speaking, a deliberate literary construct. As Raymod Detrez explains, “national literature” displays “national distinctive features”—national themes (rooted in a shared history), recognizable environments and personified features of such environment (mountains, rivers, etc.), and protagonists that speak a specific language in a particular way; it “contributes to the creation of the national community, making it ‘visible’ by constructing its cultural distinctiveness and strengthening the bonds between its members by providing them with a mythologized self-image” (2020, p. 28). By focusing on the constructedness of national identity, Detrez’s conception exposes the “worldly” foundation of “national” historiographies, identities, and literatures—their

<sup>1</sup> In his “Europeanization or lunacy: the idea of world literature and the autonomization of the Bulgarian literary field,” Penchev writes that “Almost completely severed from its medieval past, Bulgarian literature came into being and developed its thematic and generic system in the nineteenth century by selectively adopting different models of European literature [...]. The process of cultural Westernization, however, almost immediately provoked resistance and opposition toward everything considered to be an immature imitation of the ‘West,’ unnecessary and even harmful with regard to the actual needs of the Bulgarian public” (2020, p. 81).

<sup>2</sup> Kiossev defines the self-colonizing metaphor as descriptive of cultures that had “succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the west without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact”; as ‘peripheral,’ “they had to recognize self-evidently foreign cultural supremacy and voluntarily absorb the basic values and categories of colonial Europe” (2008).

plurilingualism and multiculturalism—particularly those of the states subsumed under the Ottoman empire, eager to define themselves as singular and, thus, distinct from others. As Johann Strauss observes, however, even the notion of “national literature” is a West European invention (2003, p. 39), as is world literature (*Weltliteratur*), the coinage of which is attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Thus, while utilizing the term “national literature” reinforces a West European mapping of the globe, world literature, “conceived as a composition of national literatures [...] reinforced the ideological notion of national literatures in both the dominant and dependent countries,” in the words of Marko Juvan (2019, p. 6). Both conceptions end up overlooking the literary conversions and complex cross-cultural interchanges that underlie the homogeneity, singularity, or exclusivity implicit in the term “national.” Neumann and Rippl point out that Franco Moretti’s approach to world literature fails to account precisely for these conversions and interchanges which constitute a two-way flow that has “shaped not only ‘peripheral’ but also ‘Western’ textual practices” (2017, p. 7).<sup>3</sup> To overlook the two-way transformative force of this flow is to disregard (world) literature’s capacity “to create open, polycentric and plural worlds, in which conflicting epistemes, practices and norms coexist in mutually transformative patterns” they write, seeking to redirect the world literature discourse toward literature’s capacity *to world* (Neumann & Rippl, 2017, p. 12).<sup>4</sup>

In line with their endeavor, this article focuses on the poetry collection *There, where we are not* (Там, където не сме)<sup>5</sup> of the most well-known contemporary Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov and proposes that Gospodinov’s poems are not concerned with safeguarding or appealing to a homogenous national authenticity but rather with exposing the relationship of self and world as coextensive and mutually constitutive. At the heart of this undertaking is a language that enables his poems to remake the world as they reconfigure the self through words and meanings in flux, at play in making (sense of) a self through a plurality of multitemporal, decentered worlds as well as in making (sense of) a world through a plurality of polyphonous, dispersed selves. My argument draws on Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of the “singular plural” and his extensive writing on the term “world” to further illuminate the ways in which Gospodinov’s collection *worlds* by juggling a multiplicity of specific

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed articulation of the criticisms leveled at world literature theories, see Marco Juvan’s introduction to his *Worlding a peripheral literature*, where he writes that “*Weltliteratur*—whether we understand it as a theoretical concept, an ideologeme, a publishing and translation practice, a transnational network of literary life or a school canon—appears to legitimize Western (male, white, bourgeois) dominance and reinforce monolingualism (English as a global language), imposing itself on all others as a universal criterion” (2019, p. 14).

<sup>4</sup> In *Anglophone world literatures*, Neumann and Rippl challenge the assumptions of world systems analysis and the focus of world literature theories on global circulation. Instead, they suggest approaching world literature through the concept of world-making which “entails an array of imaginative maneuvers, such as the creation of new, non-Euro-centric geographies and the tentative entanglement of heterogeneous places into networks of reciprocal exchange; the disjunctive translation between diversified local epistemes and situated practices across the world; the negotiation between the singular and the plural as well as between the particular and universal; the exploration of transitory spaces, contact zones and global trajectories, including their role in the creation of new, nomadic epistemologies” (2017, p. 11).

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

geographic locations and by attending to the singularity of a moment through its refraction into event and *non-event*. In a section titled, “The Sundays of the world” (“Неделите на света”), “there, where we are not” is not a single, unique place but a plurality of places and times, singular and shared, uninhabited and teeming with life, worlds observed and observing, worlds that have familiar names—Berlin, Vienna, Ljubljana, Paris, Rome, Kraków, Sofia—but each makes up “a world crammed full of absences” (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 79). Thus, *There, where we are not*, I suggest, exposes the taking place of worlds in their singular plurality through their coextension with itinerant selves. The poems world the singular by articulating it not in opposition to the world but out of the multiplicity of worlds that make it meaningful, conceiving the self not as a stable homogenous totality but as a dynamic heterogeneous assemblage that takes place every instant *with* the world.

### Being-with-the-world/s

The question of the “world” in world literature is taken up directly in Pheng Cheah’s *What is a world?*, where he points out that the bulk of the world literature discourse is focused nearly exclusively on the literature part of the term. In “Missed encounters,” the book’s introduction, Cheah writes that theories of world literature “are concerned with how literary texts attain worldliness as a result of the establishment of multiple concrete attachments through circulation,” equating the world with “circulatory movements that cut across national-territorial borders,” and thus, effectively taking the world for granted (2016, p. 3). Like Neumann and Rippl, Cheah finds the discourse regarding literature and its worlding to be rooted in the assumption of an actual, given world or in the global market exchange as the latter’s “expression, field, and product” (2016, p. 5), and, therefore, reductive or even oblivious to the world-making force of world literature. Drawing on Heidegger’s conception of worlding as a process of temporalization, Cheah argues that the world is open (or an opening) and that temporality sustains and constitutes this openness. Temporalizing prevents the world from being regulated and reduced to objective givenness or subjective rationality, because time is itself open and an ontological condition that “precedes and exceeds relations between a subject and an object” (Cheah, 2016, p. 114). In this sense, temporalizing is not a rational activity (although it enables us to “tell” time) and the world is not constitutive or the product of rational thought, because rational thought is unable to account for the excess of worlding itself, of our selves being worlded through time and in relation to others, which is always more than our conceptualization of our/selves. Tapping into the *force* of the world, according to Cheah, involves a thinking that is not rigidly abstract or teleological, because the world is neither pre-mapped nor pre-determined—it exists neither as a single space (a globe) nor as or in accordance with a single temporal measurement (GMT, for instance). To articulate the world in terms of cartography and geometry is actually to *unworld*, Cheah argues, i.e., to delimit the excess of meaning (or of meaning-making itself) that occurs in the process of worlding to a given referent as well as to restrict human relations to a politico-economic model within a totalized teleological construct (rationality itself). Narrated as heterotopic and multitemporal,

in the process of being worlded at all times, the world cannot be identified as a static referent—it is neither definitive and actual, i.e., “*the real world*,” nor fictional, i.e., the world of a narrative. Cheah explains the profound and originary relation between time, world, and human beings thus: “In an obvious but fundamental sense, there is a world only because we exist and there is time. We are worldly only because we are beings with a finite temporal existence” (2016, p. 108).

Cheah moves away from space as a defining aspect of the world and makes existential spatiality a function of temporal processes, because he conceives of spatializing as a means of homogenizing multiplicity, which, in turn, closes the irreducible openness of the world into objectively locatable presence. Like him, Nancy—perhaps the most well-known philosopher engaged in theorizing the notion of “world”<sup>6</sup>—is concerned about an understanding of presence as an objective position of being. In “Being singular plural,” he writes that “Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [...] in order to be itself *as* such. This ‘*as*’ presupposes the distancing, spacing, and division of presence. Only the concept of ‘presence’ contains the necessity of this division” (2000, p. 2). His point is that in order for presence to recognize itself *as* presence it cannot be singular but must divide itself into more than one, something that objectively locatable presence ignores or is oblivious to when understood as originary oneness, as pure singularity or individuality, or as substance. Presence is another way to think being, and being itself is in constant, unarrestable motion of making sense (both as the activity of sensory creation and as making meaning), an activity premised upon its plurality. More precisely, this activity is made possible by the plurality of being and the polylogue of language, since one is only able to say “I” to oneself and to another if one is *with* or between others that make this “I” distinct/distinguishable as “I” both to oneself and to others. “With” is, therefore, of critical significance to Nancy, who argues that “To-be-with is to make sense mutually, and only mutually” (2000, p. 83). This is to say that the essence of singularity is not substance with a single origin but “the punctuality of a ‘with’ that establishes a certain origin of meaning and connects it to an infinity of other possible origins” (Nancy, 2000, p. 85).

Rona Cohen observes that Nancy’s fundamental ontology of plurality precludes any principle of homogenization “under which to subsume the [irreducible] multiplicity of worlds that we inhabit as beings-in-the-world” (2018). In this sense, the origin of the world occurs at every moment that meaning—collective and incommensurable—is made, i.e. a world is made/re-made instantaneously through the circulation of meaning. Thus, self and world are in a simultaneous coming to be (or be-coming), a *dynamism*, in Nancy and Aurélien Barrau’s articulation, that is singular plural. They propose that “perhaps we do not live in a world or in several

<sup>6</sup> Among Nancy’s many texts that focus directly on the notion of “world” are *The sense of the world* (1997), *The creation of the world or globalization* (2007), *What’s these worlds coming to?* (2015), *The possibility of the world: conversations with Pierre-Philippe Jandin* (2017), and *The world’s fragile skin* (2021), though “Being singular plural” is at the foundation and includes references to “world” throughout the chapter.

worlds. Perhaps it is rather that the world or worlds unfold, diverge, or intersect in us and through us” (2014, p. 6), which makes distinguishing our/selves from a world difficult if not nonsensical altogether. To say that one is *in* or *within* the world, therefore, misunderstands the co-extensiveness or co-becoming of self and world. Nancy’s suggestion, therefore, is that it is more precise to say that one is *with* the world instead.

Ultimately, for Cheah, “World never *is*, but *worlds*” (2016, p. 117), and literature both exposes and maintains this worlding by virtue both of its temporal structure and its being open to infinite interpretation. “Ontologically infrastructural to the existing world” (Cheah, 2016, p. 311), literature offers a possible response to capitalist unworlding and modernity’s worldlessness. For the latter argument, Cheah draws on Heidegger’s privileging of poetry as literature that shares “an ontological affinity with the world because it exemplifies nonthematic discourse” (2016, p. 127), which is to say, it exposes and enacts a nonrational bringing together of beings, meanings, and times—poetry worlds. This article also turns to poetry as the literary ground for a discussion of world literature and its capacity to world, to some extent because poetry re/introduces sense into the world, that is, it worlds a world of sense, rather than of logic, revitalizing a world in motion that homogenizing constructs (be they geographical, historical, or geometrical) have “drained of sensuous force,” to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase (1873, p. 4). As Gospodinov urges: “Let’s remember that the best part about literature is that it avoids easy explanations of the world” (2020, p. 247).

In April 2016, when he published *There, where we are not*—a collection of previously unpublished poems written over a decade—the press release by Janet 45 (his long-standing Bulgarian publisher) pronounced the return of the poet. It had been nine years since Gospodinov’s fourth volume of poetry appeared in print. But what *There, where we are not* makes evident is that the poet never left. In fact, as Gospodinov himself admits, he regularly smuggles poetry into his prose; and his novels, steadily gaining national and international acclaim since the turn of the century,<sup>7</sup> attest to it. His second and widely celebrated novel, *The physics of sorrow*, for instance, showcases—in the words of Marie Vrinat-Nikolov, his translator into French—Gospodinov’s ability to transform the Bulgarian tongue into a poem of the everyday. It was Vrinat-Nikolov’s translation of *The physics of sorrow* (*Physique de la mélancolie*) that prompted Nancy to urge everyone to read it without delay and to write of the literary vitality of a country and a language poised to mobilize the Mediterranean expanse. A similar vitality and movement animate *There, where we are not*, where memory, as in *The physics of sorrow*, “puts into play a synchrony of the ancient, the contemporary and the future,” and where “a bounding, agile, joyful, rich language” (Nancy, 2020, p. 249) worlds, i.e., brings forth incommensurable relations between self and world with a sensuous force.

<sup>7</sup> *The physics of sorrow* (2010) was a finalist for the 2015 PEN Literary Award for Translation and won the 2016 Jan Michalski Prize for Literature as well as the 2019 European Angelus Award. Gospodinov’s first novel, *Natural novel* (1999), won the 2021 Athens Prize for Literature and his latest, *Time shelter* (2020), was the recipient of the most prestigious Italian prize for literature, Premio Strega Europeo.

## “We” world: splits and circulations

Cheah writes that the “self is not objectively locatable because in its being, it is always originally directed and transported outside itself toward the world and others” (2016, p. 106). This articulation echoes Nancy’s conception of the individual as intra- and trans-individual at the same time, as the discrete and transitory emergence of a simultaneous intersection of singularities. Accordingly, being, meaning, and world are always already structured through the *with*—plurally singular or singularly plural—without which nothing exists. “[T]he structure of *with*,” Nancy writes, “is the structure of the *there* [...] to be there is to be with, and to be with makes sense” (2000, p. 98), by which he expresses the idea that the “there” of presence, of “there is,” cannot be assumed as given but must come to be as a co-creation of meaning, the spacing of which is the world. In *The sense of the world*, he writes that the world, coextensive (co-spaced, co-opened, co-arriving, co-expressing) with “the taking-place of all existing[,] [...] says the *there* of the ‘there is’” (1997, pp. 155–156), which is “nothing but spacing as such” (1997, p. 159). “There” is (the) taking (of) place, the localization or spacing of time, a coming-to-presence, as Laura McMahon observes in her discussion of Nancy’s conception of spacing with regard to an artwork. To Nancy, spacing is critical for the world to remain open and resistant to totalizing efforts that aim to produce communal identities by collapsing the space between singular plural beings (McMahon, 2011, p. 625).

In “Writing from the saddest place in the world,” Gospodinov articulates a similar collapse precipitated by the regime of Bulgarian socialism/communism which denied what he calls the right to a personal story and demanded that stories be told “primarily in the first-person plural, in one collective ‘we’” (2020, p. 242). One could make the case that all of Gospodinov’s writing, from poetry and prose to essays, has, in some sense, aimed to expose the potentiality of literature to world through the singular plural of a (personal) story. He discusses this effort directly with regard to a collection he co-edited, *I lived socialism. 171 personal stories*, and that brings together the experiences of “that perennial 99.9% who voted in the elections during those years [of communism],” i.e., the lives of the people in the middle, in-between those who were sent to prison for political reasons and those in the upper echelon of the Politburo (the ruling organ of the communist party) (2020, p. 242). Each personal story, thus, worlds by placing the lived life of socialism against the backdrop of the regime of socialism as living that (was) denied worlding. “The world withheld,” a section of “Writing from the saddest place in the world,” contains Gospodinov’s reflections on the singular plural of sorrow, the sorrows of nations and continents along with the Bulgarian and his own private sorrows about a world/ing that was denied, withheld, made impossible somewhere between them: “To have this sorrow about something you have never had, to yearn for something in a world that has never been yours and that you have, nevertheless, lost” (2020, p. 243). The loss that Gospodinov identifies is simultaneously some given place that a souvenir refers to and a spacing or worlding that is unable to take place, to come to presence as a *there*. His contention, central to a number of his writings, is that unrealized events, events that did



not happen, the *non-events* in a person's or a nation's life impact self-conception even more powerfully through their absence than events that did occur. If world and self come to be simultaneously, then a world withheld is a self withheld, a self that was prevented from emerging. The *there* of this absence, or the absent *there is* structures Gospodinov's *There, where we are not*.

The title of the volume foregrounds the question of the *there* from the start; and the most obvious way of reading it is through absence—*there*, as a space (“there, where”) of nonexistence (“are not”) of a collective, first-person plural (“we”). The implication of this reading is that we are able to construct a world only because of the *there*, where we are not, which serves as a background that makes the creation of *here*, where we are, possible and gives meaning to it as foreground. The *here* is not a foreground that emerges stable and solid for us to inhabit, however; it is rather in constant flux, in continuous interchange with the background, with the *there*. Thus, rather than reinforcing the conception of an actual world (here) to which possible worlds (there) are merely related through fiction, Gospodinov's poems undermine the very conception of an actual, given world. The world comes to the fore as nothing other than an interplay of worlds, sustained by the spacing between foreground and background. But the title splits itself also into at least two other, paradoxical readings, implying at the same time that we *are* there, where we are not, and that *there* is where *we* are not we, us, our/selves. The former reading further exposes the interplay between foreground and background, their coextensive configuration of each other, as it ironically turns out that, more often, we are *there*, where we are (bodily) not—an alternate reality in the making, a reverie, a non-event—than where we actually (bodily) are (or are supposed to be)—our bodily lives (with parameters often taken for granted). Thus, *there*, where we are (bodily) is not where we actually are, which destabilizes the certainty of the actual place that we assume to objectively occupy. This opening of the *there* by virtue of its articulation by a human being is what Nancy terms the existential condition of the human being or *the worldly*. To him, “‘World’ says the *there* of the there is” (Nancy, 1997, p. 156), and by localizing being into a *there*, as Gospodinov's title indicates, also dislocates it, exposing the openness of *there*. The latter of the two paradoxical readings above focuses on the first-person plural, the *we* and the *not we*, an indispensable split that brings *we*/not we into presence, “presence in the original multiplicity of its division,” as Nancy phrases it (2000, p. 3).

In “Being singular plural,” Nancy writes: “Let us say we for all being, that is, for every being, for all beings one by one, each time in the singular of their essential plural” (2020, p. 3). To him—as to Gospodinov, who writes “I were” near the end of *The physics of sorrow*, putting the verb in the past tense of the first-person plural—“we,” or being-with, is constitutive of the *there*, of taking place or worlding. The world would not make sense without the singular plural, the “we” not as a given homogenous totality or meaning but as a “‘first-person plural’ which makes sense of the world as the spacing and intertwining of so many worlds (earths, skies, histories) that there is a taking place of meaning, or the crossing-through [*passages*] of presence” (Nancy, 2000, p. 5). Gospodinov's “The places where we are not” (“Местата, където не сме”) brings into presence this spacing, intertwining, and crossing-through of a present/absent “we”:



1.  
Sometimes quiet and deserted—  
a corner in shadow,  
a fly on the window,  
a sunray upon the floor,  
dust in the air,  
a radio left on,  
empty tables,  
Hopper-esque,  
a clock of a railway station,  
an afternoon in August,  
grass between the tracks.

There it is always empty,  
There is no one  
(or so we would like it to be)  
in the places  
where we are absent,  
where we are not.

2.  
On occasion crammed and noisy places.  
There they meet up, embrace, ki-  
ss, pass by, run,  
catch trams,  
till late in the night they talk  
in some square, they drink beer,  
laugh loudly, come home,  
have sex, breathe in the dark,  
loungue on Sunday mornings,  
drink multiple coffees, walk  
dogs, push strollers,  
roll  
on the grass (like in the ads).

Teeming with life,  
it's quite offensive somehow  
how it teems with life  
there, where we are absent,  
there, where we are not. (2016, pp. 53–54)

The worlds in the poem emerge as confluences of presence and absence, though absence is made present through the sensory evocations only to put into question the possibility of actual (absolute) presence. As in the title of the collection, “we” in the poem is both present and absent, both empty and teeming, simultaneously afternoon, late night, and morning. The first part exposes “we” as coextensive with the

*there* through the bringing together of singular objects that spatialize and constitute the plural “we”: a corner, a fly, a sunray, dust, a radio, tables, and the last three references to time and movement—a clock, August, and railroad tracks—ending with grass in-between. “We” is each of these elements taken separately but it only makes sense as an absent “we” through their coming together, their multiplicity, which makes evident the presence of the absence of “we” (or the non-present “we”). Nancy articulates it thus: “‘We’ says (and ‘we say’) the unique event whose uniqueness and unity consist in multiplicity” (2000, p. 5). Similarly, the grass in-between—its resilience, untendedness, singular plurality—would not make sense as such without the train tracks. And neither would the absence of the train without the grass in-between—a world of presence and absence that is not given but comes-to-be in the moment of confluence, as an event.

The reciprocity between self and world is made more evident in another poem from the same part of the volume, “The Sundays of the world,” which not only exposes the singular plurality of Sunday/s, but by contextualizing it/them, pluralizes “the” world. Although the most obvious way of translating this second part of the collection is “The Sundays of the world,” the way in which the title is depicted on the page, discloses a slight break in the word “неделите” (Sundays) as if to underscore the discreteness of the negative particle “не” (un-, non-, or no) from “делите” (“деля” being an obsolete form of the verb “to work”) and, thus, highlight “неделите” not only as literally the days when one does not work (Sundays) but also as “не делите на света,” “the unworkings of the world.” In “unworkings” one might hear something of Nancy’s inoperative community that can be described as a spontaneous coming together with, a non-teleological and non-purposeful shared unworking. Such are the confluences that world the world in “Plaza. Composition” (“Площад. Композиция”):

If they ask me what I did,  
 I'll say:  
 I observed a plaza,  
 observed it late in the evening,  
 observed it early in the morning,  
 and now it's the afternoon...  
 The plaza has a name  
 greater than itself, erased:  
 Piazza della Madonna del Monti.  
 The plaza also has  
 a dozen pigeons, a dog and a church.  
 When the bell tolls,  
 the pigeons take flight,  
 while the dog barks near ritualistically,  
 counting the hours.

And I know not any longer, am I observing  
 or am I a part of the plaza  
 with pigeons, church and dog,

that another observes. (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 56)

In order for the self to comprehend itself as such, to perceive itself and world, it must be more than one, or, to put it another way, it must be in relation to others. A world emerges between a speaker and those questioning the speaker as well as between observer and observed, as they engage in an interchange of positions, spaced by the confluence of pigeons, dog, and church bell. Each of the latter is separate in its sensory dimensions of taking flight, barking, and tolling, and yet they are related through the sensory interaction. Together, they bring forth the plaza in a way that its erased name cannot—the plaza is nothing other than a momentary composition. Thus, if asked what they did, the speaker might well have answered: I worlded; and, as Steven Connor observes, “To think the world is to give it the chance of having been,” (2010, p. 43). Connor’s point is that to think the world is to immobilize it or rather to take a snapshot of a spacing that takes place out of a worlding in motion. To take the snapshot for the world, however, is to miss the world or to void it, as does a distinction between the local and the global that takes space as “inert background or arena,” for instance (Connor, 2010, p. 36). Following Heidegger, he conceives of the world’s “indeterminate finitude” and “open necessity” as the particular spacing, the world’s constitution in a particular way, that emerges out of infinite possibilities.<sup>8</sup> Connor suggests that only a “mapping” of movement or itinerary—“of mediations and relations, of *passe-partouts* and *between-times*” (2010, p. 36)—can provide a new understanding of world. Rather than mapping *of* movement that may still take places as inert, it seems to me that, for a new understanding of world, mapping *as* movement may be more apposite.

Such mapping as movement that brings forth meanings as interchanges between oneself and another that world a particular space is prominent in “Weak capillaries” (“Слаби капилляри,” from the first part of the volume, “Small morning crimes,” “Малки сутрешни престъпления”) in which places and selves form a spontaneous blood bond:

I’ve bled in London, Yambol and Paris,  
I’ve bled in Istanbul  
like my throat’d been slit,  
leaning against some stone wall  
in the afternoon,  
I’ve bled foolishly in Manhattan  
from Third Avenue to Central Park,  
with fingers pressed against my nostrils,  
I swallowed, gaping up,  
I’ve bled at a literary reading,  
on the train to Coimbra too  
(‘twas hot as hell),  
I’ve spilled blood in Normandy

---

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps “the virtual” of Henri Bergson might be a better fit for the phrasing of this idea instead of “possibilities,” which implies their already having been determined as possible (versus impossible).

without a drop of valor,  
 in Berlin by the Spree  
 near Brecht's theater  
 [...] (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 44)

The blood circulates among names of locations, bringing them into being without placing them in a hierarchical relationship dependent on their quantitative measurements (size, population, “likes,” etc.) and geographical mapping. The itinerary appears without a telos, as indeterminate circulation that brings forth a variety of selves—a lacerated self, a feeble (leaning) self, a foolish self, a literary self, a gaping self, an overheating self, a valorless self. Each of them only makes sense in relation to the others and to places with material and socio-historical dimensions that it brings to the fore: feebleness in its encounter with a stone wall, foolishness vis-à-vis Manhattan's grandeur with its capitalized Third Avenue and Central Park, valorlessness in relation to Normandy. Nancy articulates the multiplicity involved in circulation thus: “From place to place, and from moment to moment, without any progression or linear path, bit by bit and case by case, essentially accidental, [circulation] is singular and plural in its very principle” (2000, pp. 4-5). As in other poems in *There, where we are not*, circulation exposes the bond between self and world as “the originary plurality of origins and the creation of the world in each singularity” (Nancy, 2000, p. 5). The meaning born with each singular relation circulates and worlds—a life-sustaining blood transfusion. The “weakness” of the capillaries, their porousness points to bleeding as movement and the movement of the blood as constitutive of the bond between self and world, each drop's singularity elemental to the plurality of the circulating flow.

## Language and world

Perhaps the sense of dislocation that permeates the collection through the dizzying indeterminate circulations (which also include specific places referenced across the poems such as Vienna, Rome, Kraków, Ljubljana, Dresden, Frankfurt, and Sofia to mention but a few more) attains the loss of language in the world that Nancy intimates in “Being singular plural.” He writes: “Language says the world; that is, it loses itself in it and exposes how ‘in itself’ it is a question of losing oneself in order to be of it, with it, to be its meaning—which is all meaning” (Nancy, 2000, p. 3). What Nancy seems to be pointing out is that only language that remains indeterminate, that does not seek to represent the world “as it is,” that avoids an ultimate definition or a final configuration by allowing meaning to lose itself in infinite transformations can world a world that is “centrifugal, erratic, open” (2017, p. 134). If circulation has a pulse, then language senses it and does so in a particular way when it comes to poetry by exposing the eventality of meaning, its spontaneous occurrence out of infinite kaleidoscopic confluences, each with its own patterns and rhythms. Language “exposes the world and its proper being-with-all-beings in the world,” Nancy contends, “exposes it as the world” (2000, p. 85).

“After the tongues of Eden” (“Подир езиците на рая,”—Gospodinov appears to be playing on the word “рая,” denoting both heaven and his daughter’s name Raya, who appears at various ages in the collection) is the third and final segment of poems in *There, where we are not*. As the title indicates, the segment turns directly to language and, in my reading, to the polyphonous and indeterminate worldings that occur in-between sounds and in the silences between words and senses. The segment commences with “The coming of language,” (“Приждането на езика”) a story about “prelanguage,” about the *there* of *there is* where language is worlded and worlds:

In the beginning there is howling  
 prehistoric beasts  
 tectonic shifts  
 dislodging  
 boulder and stone  
 swishing among branches  
 rumble  
 this is not yet language  
 this is just prehistory  
 and prelanguage  
 a primordial bouillon  
 something’s gurgling there  
 burbling vowels  
 volcano and throat  
 magma  
 a million years shall pass  
 in days and months  
 to the first  
 ma-ma (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 85)

The poem exposes the source of language as onomatopoeia, a world of sense and, more precisely, of sounds that have no other function than just being. They create movement and relationality: howling, swishing, gurgling, burbling that take place “among branches,” “boulder and stone,” vowels, “volcano and throat.” Although the lines delineate an evolutionary trajectory for the birth of (a meaningful) language—a primordial bullion producing ultimately a first “ma-ma”—it also suggests that such an evolutionary trajectory is an undetermined eruption of senses. The sensory force is shared among all tongues (and language “users”) and springs forth from a sharing itself—out of the friction of branches, vowels, a boulder and a rock, channeled by a volcano and a throat. Each of these elements is brought in relation with each other, though the line breaks and their spacing in the poem’s structure indicate that they are not, ultimately, together, but remain distinct and disparate, which makes the plurality of sounds possible.

“Raya’s tongue” (or, alternatively, “The tongue of Heaven,” “Езикът на Рая”) extends the chaotic interrelations of sounds and silences while also emphasizing the difference between sound and language. The epigraph to the poem, attributed to St. Gaustin, IVth century (a character invented by Gospodinov that appears in

a number of his works), reads: “Now it knows the secret, but language is missing. When language arrives, the secret will be forgotten” (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 86). The poem withholds the secret, whatever that secret may be, as the words, incantation-like, flow in and out of sound confluences:

yàboodoo màma dahwèhdeh  
 yaboodoo yaboodoo  
 yoyòtah momèhnyah  
 momèhnyah toèetsah  
 boodòcheh peètsah  
 [...] (Gospodinov, 2016, p.86).

The final lines “ahya / bahya” invoke the word *bahya* [*baya*] (бая) in the Bulgarian, which, as a noun (*bahyá*) means a great deal or too much of something, and, as a verb (*báhya*) means to chant mystical words usually in order to heal but sometimes to tell the future or invoke/expel ghosts. One wonders whether the secret is in the incantation or whether the incantation is itself the secret, a nonlanguage that inheres in language and that retains what is most spontaneously creative about language—its capacity to world continuously wild, open spaces and selves, not subsumable under pre-existing meanings or reducible to given dimensions of being. Even if a word is a metric of space, a conceptual dimension with a worldly projection, no word can escape its sensory prelanguage—a gurgling, magma that prevents meaning from congealing and petrifying. This kind of *baehneh* (баене), an incantation at the foundation of language that resists being closed into a particular meaning, may world a healing (from systems and articulations that unworld) and an open future—open both in terms of uncertainty with regard to the meaning of the coming worlds but also regarding the beings along with whom these worlds will arrive.

In “Names,” the birth of a child is simultaneous with the arrival of new selves:

It  
 comes and gives out names  
 before it speaks  
 still mute  
 mum Adam  
 of the names  
 You  
 shall be called Mother  
 You  
 shall be called Father  
 I was born to birth you  
 to befather you  
 to bemother you (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 87)

It is not the arrivant who speaks in the beginning of the poem—a speechless, mute “it”—but its arrival itself. Thus, there is already a split in the coming “it” between it itself and its arrival that world in the process of arriving. “It” comes

with itself and with others—the Mother, the Father—with language that bespeaks their coexistence and co-becoming. Language itself is coexistence, as Nancy explains: “For a word is what it is only among all words, and a spoken word is what it is only in the ‘with’ of all speaking” (2000, p. 86). But in the term “language” we should not hear proper syntax and predetermined denotation. As for Nancy, for Gospodinov language is also open, polyphonous, and richly sensory; it exposes a *there* that is distinct from the *here* of bodies (though the two are coextensive). In the very beginning of *There, where we are not*, “In place of a preface” announces a desire to write “Of this *here* of bodies and *there* of language. / Of that (h)el(l)sewhere (it’s another hell), / where we will arrive some day (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 7, 6–8).<sup>9</sup> The *here* seems to be the actualization of confluences the fluidity and transformative dynamic of which is sustained by the *there* of language. Nevertheless, one might understand the distinction also as a *there* of language that has the capacity to reify and represent as real what is not but that is related to a *here* of bodies that are sensory, perceptive, and in perpetual transformation—pulsating *with* life. In either case, the paradoxical relations between *here* and *there* expose their inextricable entwinement with each other, a body of language that makes sense and worlds perpetually.

*There, where we are not* ends with nine “Fragments of joyful living in solitude” (“Фрагменти от радостно живеене в самота”), with snow falling and silence in poetic prose. This conclusion attends more directly to the paradox of solitude, of being with while being without, to suggest that solitude makes being with all the more perceptible. It also offers the question of a possible symbiosis between two different languages—that of a human being and that of nature—involved in making a world. The relation between them extends the collection’s query into the languages of childhood and of aging, of sounds at play and of purposeful sounds; perhaps this is also where Nancy finds the agility, richness, and joyfulness of Gospodinov’s writing. In this, too, his writing exposes the openness of language to play, to an alternate perspective and a different world, to a new name. As Gospodinov often insists, we are made of words; but if selves and words are coextensive, then so are our worlds. His collection exposes a distinct “geography” of the world, a geography beyond hierarchies, walls, borders, classes, citizenships—“a geography of the beyond,” as he writes in “In place of a preface” (2016, p. 7), where the beyond is an open and irreducible bringing forth of worlds. His final piece in the volume, the eighth fragment, “To begin,” proposes this more directly not only through its title: “I return after a long absence. The room is empty and disorganized. I take out of the bag some bread, two kilos of apples, a kilo of potatoes, four eggs, a piece of hard cheese and a jar of quince jam. All of it purchased from the nearby hofladen (village store). I light the lamp and the stove. The world

<sup>9</sup> Gospodinov’s attentiveness to and intricate play with language is evident here in the Bulgarian word for elsewhere, “drugade” (“другаде”), which he splits into “drug/ad/e” (“друг/ад/е”) to mean literally it’s/another/hell. I have translated it as “hellwhere” in an attempt to capture this wordplay. The breakage bears the mark of his overt philosophy of and covert call for empathy as the most direly needed component of contemporary life. Thus, “elsewhere” is imbued with the need to glimpse the other and particularly another’s hell-like circumstances.



can be made, prepared anew” (Gospodinov, 2016, p. 123). Implicit in the analogy between world and food, making the former as one would the latter, is the need for sustenance—to prepare the world from scratch, to world as essential nourishment. All one needs is some local produce, light, and a bit of heat to begin. Though in the absence of a hofladen, a book of poetry might suffice.

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