

Jana Bukova

## Not Small. Minor

Steinbeck would be nothing without the American guns. I put Dos Passos and some others in the same lot. Had they been born in Paraguay, for instance, who would read them? A country's power determines a writer's eminence. Isn't Galdos a great novelist? But who knows him outside Spain?

The statement is Luis Bunuel's and seems to exhaust a large part of the topics set forth. I had come across it when I was 19, I had copied it on my typewriter and since then I have kept it among sundry sheets and notebooks. "A country's power determines a writer's eminence". That had no doubt impressed me.

There exists some primordial injustice in the dealing of literary cards even before the game has started, and Bunuel has expressed it more than clearly.

I don't know if you can recall – not that you should – the third-rate film *Wolf* with Jack Nicholson. His hero, a clerk in a big New York publishing house in his fifties, has a series of failures happen to him: his wife leaves him for a younger man, a young colleague displaces him from his position, and to top it all he is transferred to the Eastern European literature department. This last turn is the straw breaking the camel's back of his frustration, then a wolf bites him and so he starts shape-shifting when the moon is full etc. Clearly the script writer could not have possibly to come up with a more miserable predicament than Eastern European literature's into which to thrust his character in order to show his humiliation. So much for small literatures' outlet to big markets. There is no better way to designate a situation than a sound Hollywood cliché.

As regards the manner in which smaller literatures communicate between each other, on an academic level at least, one can glean a good idea of it from the quite realistic description of the department of – once again – Eastern European literatures at the University of Amsterdam that Dubravka Ugrešić makes in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*: a dust-laden study nobody enters, and a single post-graduate student writing a thesis on the misogyny of Kundera. Certainly, a hyperbolic example, but enough telling in the situation of relentless reduction of the budget of philology, especially of the "small" philologies.

Against the whole of this backdrop, I sense a certain danger in mentioning Kafka's choice from among three languages. For it's a matter of course for one to suppose that, had Kafka for some reason written in Czech, he would be probably as well-known as Čapek. No more and no less. And if he had written in Yiddish, the likelihood of his remaining all but unknown is a considerable one. One way or another, we'll never find out, but that almost improvable assumption is precisely the reason why we keep talking about small literatures, translating small literatures, and even writing small literatures.

After this “optimistic” introduction, I proceed with the first part of my presentation, the practical one. Although I am aware I was invited to this seminar precisely in my capacity as author and translator between two literatures<sup>1</sup>, both of which may be labelled as “small”, this part is going to be rather short simply because I have the feeling that everything I would say is already known or at least goes without saying.

To translate from major to minor languages is the natural thing to do. That is the natural direction of the flow of information, incontrovertible as a law of nature. The opposite: to translate from minor to major languages is an act carried out against the law of gravity. That is as if you were pushing water upslope. Not undoable, but, to do it, you need an entire mechanism, energy consumption, and a collective endeavour. Behind the Hungarian authors that we know, stands the Hungarian state. Behind the Croatian authors that we know, stands the Croatian state. Behind the success of such difficult and perplexing an author like Cărtărescu, there undoubtedly stands the Romanian state. Behind the Bulgarian authors stands no one.

I would point out several probable reasons that could attract the attentions of readers or publishers to a small literature, most of them not at all literary:

In small literatures, one inescapably recognises an exoticism of some kind. Their very designation refers you to distant or else not sufficiently familiar places. That’s the reason someone might say: “Why, an author from Taiwan! Let’s learn a few things about Taiwan”. Certainly no author is bound to compile travel guides about his or her country. And, should a person be looking for information about distant or unfamiliar places, it would be far more to the point for him to subscribe to the *National Geographic*. That however does not alter the fact that small literatures go usually packed up with their geographic cliché, and it remains one of the main sources of interest.

An emotional motivation is also possible: a country is in the focus of the world’s attention due to some serious humanitarian crisis and so the tentative reader is “moved” by its destiny. After the marginalisation of humanities, the journalistic discourse is affirmed as the solely reigning one. It just impregnates literature, and the literary expectations. The country in focus has its tragic curriculum vitae, its sad story that allows itself to be journalistically fabulated. From its literature, one always demands, I’d presume to say pleasurably anticipates, a drama of one kind or another: “Whatever would an author in suffering Afghanistan be writing about?”.

Another mechanism is the next one: a leading and successful author exists, and the interest towards the others rallies about him. A universally familiar example is the one of Albanian literature: since the moment that Kadare’s name announces the country’s presence in the literary map, the chances are automatically opened up for other Albanian authors.

The contact may also be facilitated by historical and political affections or by traditionally established channels of communication. For instance, in Greece there has always existed the publishers’ interest towards Serbian authors, particularly heightened during the

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgarian and Greek.

war in Yugoslavia, when public opinion was wholly pro-Serb. Or take Romania's historically established channel of access to France.

Not one of those four variants holds for Bulgaria. The country doesn't offer any exoticism, it isn't – thank goodness – in any extreme state of disaster, we have no leading author, and whatever channels of communication had at one moment been set up (as the ones to Russian literature) they are now obliterated.

There exist a few tested recipes, too, and quite literary, a matter of craftiness, which would guarantee some degree of a publisher's interest towards an author from a small literature: a well-constructed crime novel whose action takes place in unfamiliar and thus curious (for the reader) social and political circumstances. Or a family saga (preferably through a female's eyes) in which the personal histories of several generations let one form a notion of the historic processes in a given country. Whoever wishes may make use of them.

The existence of a Catch-22 is both well-known and numerous times stated governing particularly the outlet to major literatures: to manage to make a name for yourself, you have to have a good agent, but in order to have a good agent you must have in some way made a name for yourself. There are no literary agents in Bulgaria anyway, so that catch falls off of itself. One problem less, so to speak.

It is almost superfluous to specify that the sole decisive figure remains the translator. He is the one that has to seek out, chase, and persuade a publisher to show some interest in an author no one knows, coming from a literature out of whose designation no association springs and behind which no myth stands. With, as his only motivation, his irrational affection for that literature. The translators from Bulgarian to major languages (I mean translators who are native speakers of these languages) are overwhelmingly few in number, and the good ones among them even fewer. Still, one feels that the general practice is not to stimulate them, but the opposite: to repel them by any means possible. I myself am familiar with two brilliant translators, one to English, the other to Spanish, with exceptional linguistic culture, experience and literary flair, whose potential remains totally unused<sup>2</sup>. There aren't any translators' residences in Bulgaria nor translators' fellowships, the funds for translations are insignificant and the money insufficient. Award for a translation to a foreign language does not exist. Even elementary respect can't be counted on, as in the

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to add some informations which may slightly change the author's pessimistic evaluation: Italy has a considerable tradition of translations from Bulgarian into Italian since the 1920s. In more recent times, the activity of Giuseppe dell'Agata (University of Pisa) and of the publisher Voland (directed by Daniela Di Sora) should be recognized as leading phenomena in making Bulgarian (and other "minor" Slavic literatures) known to the Italian reader. The publisher Voland insures a very high standard and great accuracy in translation from one language to another, and from one culture to another. Voland certainly is a publisher for *connaisseurs*, but is not really "peripheral": though it publishes "only" a couple of dozens of books a year, it is present in all major bookshops and participates in some of the most important book fairs. Cf. <<http://www.voland.it/voland/index.aspx>> [Note of the editor of the Forum – Giovanna Brogi Bercoff].

well-known instance of Marie Vrinat and the insulting and intolerable delay in granting her Bulgarian citizenship.

Against this context, the condition of isolation and marginality of the Bulgarian literature in translation, as recognised by the statistical survey of Next Page Foundation<sup>3</sup>, is quite expectable: Bulgarian authors are published chiefly by small and peripheral publishing houses (most of them with an annual production of some 20-25 books), the books have poor circulation or are not reviewed in the press, and the print runs, even the first, are rarely sold out. Yet even this condition is a kind of a success. All the authors mentioned in the research by the Next Page Foundation (more than 300 translated books within 2000 and 2010) have succeeded in finding and winning a translator over to their side, persuading a publisher, and securing the financing. Whatever publisher, translator and financing are possible in the circumstances indicated. And all of that, from the beginning to the end, is accomplished by their personal efforts only. One is amazed at the number of those who have made it, and I admire their energy.

One thing we must not forget is that Bulgarian literature is first marginalised inside Bulgaria and only then outside it. The careless and at times openly mercantile criticism, the mysterious way literary awards are distributed, the presence of some quaint and picturesque figures in the publishing business, the hopelessly illiterate journalists, the usurping of the functions of operative criticism by blogs of doubtful literary knowledge and taste, the indifferent, distrustful, and until recently almost hostile reading audience – that's the picture of Bulgarian literary life, provided we would step back and look at it from the outside for a while. These are the only circumstances whereby an author builds her or his name, and they directly predetermine his or her outlet to the foreign market.

For an author to be presented to a major language or a big publishing house, his or her book has to have some kind of a biography. The illusion that somebody can make it abroad with sheer quality or sheer luck is pretty groundless. To reach the stage of its MS being opened, but also for something to be there to write on its back cover, a book has to have won an award in its country, to have undergone several editions, and to have quotations from enthusiastic critiques. Should someone however think that there is in Bulgarian literature some potential, not represented abroad and unused, we'd first have to change the way authors are evaluated and promoted inside this country.

It has to be mentioned that the research I have cited was done three years ago. Since then just a few things have changed, but in a positive direction. A Bulgarian author seems to have access to a wider spectrum of choices of a publisher in Bulgaria, and there is definitely a greater interest and more confidence in the attitude of the public. The advent and the activities of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation are important, too, creating as it does an outlet toward the hardest-to-reach market, the American one, and skipping the entire Kafkaesque chain of intercession between a manuscript and a publisher.

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<sup>3</sup> Burova *et al.* 2011.

And the last thing I wish to point out on this topic is that everything that has been said so far concerns fiction exclusively. Poetry is being translated and is finding its channels of communication via mechanisms that are different from and often opposite to those in the case of fiction.

I would like here to move to the second part of my exposition, which I would most tentatively call theoretical.

Bunuel's dictum on authors and the guns behind them, with which I started, besides stating, without mincing words, a truth, is topical with something else. *My Last Breath*, where the quotation comes from, appeared in 1982. It coincides with Marquez's being awarded the Nobel Prize in that same year. The fact that such a statement originates not from anyone else but a representative of the second largest language in the world – Spanish – and that at the high point of the Latin American boom, indicates that as early as thirty years ago Bunuel had a clear grasp of a thing that now, I think, is beyond any doubt: namely that in practice we cannot talk about hegemonic literatures, but of a single hegemonic literature – the English language one, and the American one in particular. A literature beside which all the rest occupy the position of small ones.

Using this as a springboard, I propose my own tripartite typology: a hegemonic literature, dominant literatures, small literatures.

The dominant literatures are the literatures of great languages and great literary histories: the French, German, Hispanic, Russian, and Italian. They are the literatures-authorities, the literatures-influences and starting points of influences. By definition all of them are European (that holds true for the Hispanic one as well – the success of a Latin American author is bound to come through Spain and through Europe). All the remaining literatures, notwithstanding the number of people speaking their language, are apprehended and taken into account as small. This covers “distant” literatures as the Japanese or the Chinese, though it would be an oxymoron to call them small!

The hegemonic literature, besides the traits of the dominant ones, possesses an additional attribute: the unprecedented disproportionateness in its communication with others. And, by this, I do not so much mean the famous narrow three percent of outlet of foreign writers towards the American book market. I am referring to this literature's being the only one that gets to others in its entirety, without selection. It arrives complete in itself, not “censored” through any axiocratic strainer, not just with its best authors, not only with the whole of its genre production (crime novels, fantasies etc.) and in its full range at that: from the masters of each kind to the most miserable and half-baked booklets, – but also with all its grey area of second-rate and even third-rate writers reduced to the common denominator of “serious literature” and gaining automatic access to being translated into dozens of languages. This is the only literature that can be viewed in its entire vertical section. Such accessibility, such abundance, uncontrolled by any valves, from the best to trash one can only encounter in one's own literature. Everything that happens in the hegemonic literature penetrates the other ones at such speed and so effortlessly as if there was no mediation of translation in that process.

The hegemonic literature has been the basic and almost sole source of influences over recent decades, it imposes its themes, mainstreams, discoveries (which are sometimes simply the rediscovered phenomena of another) and its domination is beginning to spread from the present further and further back into the past. From newspaper rankings of the hundred best books of our time to papers of academic research and encyclopaedic articles, notably on topics like Modernism, Postmodernism or the “clash” between them, the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature reads more and more like a history of the English language literature.

Simultaneously, the hegemonic literature on an ever-larger scale seizes and absorbs the voices of other literatures. And what, in the final analysis, does an Afghan author write? *The Kite Runner* – that’s what. Just so much hodgepodge against an Afghan scenery, which in all seriousness is taught in US schools as a kind of testimony. And it gets translated around the world in its capacity as one. The only Indian authors I have come across write in English. Few months ago, Chinua Achebe died, called “the grandfather of African literature”. And yet this grandfather wrote in English, too. Exactly as the most circulated Bulgarian fiction writer of all time does. The literary identities of countries and entire continents are appropriated, replaced and reformatted along established requirements in a form of literary colonisation that makes the very existence of small literatures redundant.

I would like to dwell now on the category of minor literature as it is defined by Deleuze and Guattari<sup>4</sup>. From this point in time, we can safely be sure that the literature of minorities did not create a better literature. It rather created a post-colonial mainstream based largely on drama and on exotics. The “refracted” immigrant language can tell a story as trivial as any other. The percentage of valuable, groundbreaking books by authors from a minority, Nomad, “border” ones is neither lower nor above the percentage of such books coming from any other category of authors. Forty years after the romantic postmodern vision of “otherness” (as time allows us to sense that Postmodernism after all has no less inherent romanticism than its predecessors), I think we can presume to say that to seek a revolutionary literary potential within a group signified by a non-literary characteristic – be it writing women, gay, or Pakistani authors living in Great Britain – is as naïve as searching for a revolutionary literary potential in an author just because his social origin is proletarian.

All this notwithstanding, yes, Kafka is a minor author. Yet no less minor, and also of Jewish stock, is, for example, an author writing in French and writing in the time of Deleuze and Guattari: Georges Perec. An author who squeezes language to the last drop, enters arithmetic scuffles with it, drives language into a corner, makes a bet with language and wins every time. Perec is minor not due to his “Jewishness” but because he belongs to the Oulipo, a minority that desires to be so, a private club of which you are a member if they accept it. A chosen minority in the sense of its having chosen to be such.

Kafka is minor because he is revolutionary, and not revolutionary because he is minor. As the Oulipo are minor. As are the rest, mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari: Joyce, Beckett, and Celine (oh! to literary moralists’ horror). As minor as Sorokin is in Russia, but as

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze *et al.* 1982-1983.

also Platonov was prior to him, and as Calvino in Italy, as Bernhard and Sebald writing in German, and as all of those wonderful Latin Americans. And in the hegemonic literature, Pynchon and John Barth. And, before them, Faulkner. In the small literatures, Esterhazy and Pavić. Minor literature is the one written always by a minority and in every language. As an instance of such a minority are the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the American post-modern poets with whom, despite the ubiquitous presence of the hegemonic literature, and the plenty of translations of American academic poetry, one could not come across at all. Minor literature creates its own language, each time its own novel literary convention. It is the rhizome literature, the literature with many doors, the literature avoiding interpretation because it is never created to serve an interpretation. Neither political nor social nor philosophical nor metaphysical nor psychoanalytical nor gender. It is the literary literature. Its choices and balances are determined solely and exclusively by literary laws. It is the literature that every time demands a new literary theory, and once such has been created, it can't fit in it. It encourages description in terms of easy binary oppositions because it always exists in opposition: to each academicism and established *status quo*. The boundary is the place of its sojourn because it is the literature that expands the territory of literature. It does not allow to be substituted. A distinguishing characteristic – it's impossible to be turned into a movie. It is never a centre (the very impulse of its existence is a thrust off the centre), but always a network of reciprocities and attractions. Its authors are a community and the tracing out of their contacts, relationships and break-ups via the retardations of translation, through historical vicissitudes, over decades and continents is the finest adventure in the literary history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (someday, I believe, the history of literature should be told via the history of translations). Minor literature is – I'd rather formulate it so – global in the long term. It has always been that, even before the term (global) came about. And yes, it is the literature which is the hardest to translate but, paradoxically, it is the literature that motivates translators, makes translators fall in love, and tests the limits of their own language. As you see, my personal post-postmodern proposition is not notable for its originality. It states that literature is a value.

Still, should I anyway attempt to designate the general post-postmodern literary situation, I'd choose the term digimodernism as introduced by Alan Kirby<sup>5</sup>. As one of the basic features of digital, post-postmodern society Kirby singles out the infantilisation, and in literature this tendency is particularly visible. Everywhere around the world the literary production gets infantilised, grows yellow or pink. Let us just recall the fact that in recent years the enormous book production in the hegemonic language was twice "saved" by, of all people, two bored housewives, Stephanie Mayer with her teen vampire saga and E. L. James with the trilogy on the "shades of grey". They invigorate the fading publishing business in the hegemonic language and cause the optimistic statistics about the rise in book sales and the interest in reading. It is a literary situation in which a cheep mainstream figure as Coelho seems nostalgia worth. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is in a different category, unknown

<sup>5</sup> Kirby 2006.

till now, where the very notion of word “literature” begins to hesitate about its object. Written as fan fiction inspired by Mayer’s vampire tales and with the amateurship of lexicon reading, it meets its first million of readers in the World Wide Web, without an editor’s intervention and certainly with no publisher’s mediation. Its fleshing-out in a paper body reproduces that virus spread: a simultaneous appearance in the bookshops all over the world and with an identical cover. The book is published by none other than the colossus Random House, and in the US only sales are so high (35 million copies) that, for the first time in many years, the publishing house grants bonuses to all its employees.

But at the same time, some interesting things have been happening in the dominant literatures. As for instance the unexpected and really optimistic fact that two of the books which was each a phenomenon in recent years – *Measuring the World* by Daniel Kehlmann and most of all Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* – became also unprecedented bestsellers in their countries and outside them. That first of all means the existence of critics and journalists capable of convincing, almost obsessing hundreds of thousands of readers into purchasing and opening two difficult and unconventional books, books which belong to literary literature. Whether those are the just fruits of a diligently cultivated tradition or that tradition’s final throes, nobody can possibly know. By no means would I like to leave an impression of some Eurocentric or Anti-American bias: I just mention some facts. One of them is also the decision – as the choice between languages has already been brought up – taken by the bilingual Jonathan Littell to write in French, not English. The story of the edition of *The Kindly Ones* in the United States is – by the way – almost anecdotal: following its huge success in Europe, the rights were bought for the fabulous sum of one million dollars. 150 thousand copies were brought out as a first printing, 17 thousand were sold. Littell must have known quite well what he was choosing.

Yet let us return to small literatures which are the primary object of our focus. Probably for someone to be a minor author in a small literature looks like the worst luck one could ever pick up from the hat of fortune slips. I think however it could be a chance, too. All the mainstream niches have been for a long time occupied. The minor, the literary literature is the only ticket we could submit to the big literary lottery.

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### *Abstract*

Jana Bukova  
*Not Small. Minor*

The A. challenges the belief in the oppositional potential of "small" literatures. An author's choice to write in their own 'minor' language does not depend on whether the work takes part in the field of a minority, a small, a dominant or a world-hegemonic literature. Bukova conveys her commitment to the belief in a "literary literature" that can evade interpretation, ignore the rules of the market, the political heteronomy, or even the agenda of the discourse that is closest to the literary – of literary criticism. Such writers are generally only supported by translators. Bukova points at a niche that is doubly unprofitable but symbolically promising: to write literary literature in the language of a small literature. For "small" realities like Bulgarian literature, which are supported neither by the State nor by the media, the only chances to be 'convertible' consist in self-organisation of a literary field, struggling against market and geopolitical rationales and involving translators.

### *Keywords*

Minor Literatures; Literary Fields; Translability.