

Jordan Ljuckanov

Introduction: Translating a Small Literature to the Global Market. The Bulgarian Case and Beyond

Eight from the nine essays gathered under this title were previously delivered as papers and presentations at the trilingual workshop *Translating Small Literatures to the Global Market – Проблемы перевода и выход малых литератур на мировой рынок – Проблеми на превода и излазът на малките литератури на световния пазар*, held at the Institute for Literature in Sofia in late May 2013 and co-organised by me, Maja Gorčeva and Boris Minkov. The ninth essay was included later upon my request, because its oral version¹ had previously given a considerable impulse to the idea upon which the workshop is footed.

I. Our prime concern was to delineate a specific kind of habitus a literature might have in the supposedly global interliterary field. This kind of habitus had remained, in our view, inconspicuous against such broad alternatives or oppositions as minor vs. major (literatures), or colonial vs. (post)colonised (languages, societies, cultures).

Delineating it meant to become aware of and to utter a certain globalising philosophical predisposition: one which shares neither the essentialism of Eurocentric modernisation nor the radical nominalism of some of its postmodern revisions (or inverse repetitions).

Therefore, in our call for papers we proposed a triple typology of literatures: minor vs. small vs. big (or dominant or hegemonic). We took as a point of reference the case of Franz Kafka's choice to write in a kind of German (and neither in Yiddish nor in Czech) and the conceptualisation of this case by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their essay on "minor" literature(s)². Thus we aimed to revise the dual typology implied by Deleuze and Guattari (among others) and to call into question the alleged capacity of minor literatures to counteract agendas of political and economical domination³.

¹ T. Hristov, *Literature as Gift*, an English-language version of Hristov 2011.

² "A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (Deleuze *et al.* 1982-1983: 16). And a "small" literature is, if we try a provisional definition, the literature of a "minor" language.

³ The call's suggestions and arguments are reintroduced and enhanced below, in Ljuckanov's article *Towards Paired Histories of Small Literatures, to Make Them Communicate*.

2. Assuming this perspective, we suggested investigating how the socialisation⁴ of a literature which may be considered “small” takes place in the interliterary field. Bulgarian literature seemed to represent a typical instance of a “small” literature, and, more important, one at hand in our case.

We tried to overview and partially to reconstruct its socialisation involving the standpoints of the different social agents that take part in such a process: the publisher, the translator, the literary critic, the literary historian, the (university) teacher. We also tried to take into account the divergence between the poles of a “native” and a “foreign” standpoint regarding a literature.

The uttered opinions reveal a certain (more or less expected) dependency on the habitus of their proponents. We believe, though we cannot prove it, that it is a regular and not sporadic dependency. Thus, a publisher’s standpoint turned to be closest, first, to a kind of “naïve” neo-liberal stance and, second, to uttering a kind of confidence indicative of social dominance. The publisher’s essay displayed a poetics and pragmatics of self-content: brevity and reliance on topoi rendered/promoted as self-evident. The fact that faculties of economy are generally in a good position and enjoy prestige (certainly more than faculties of literatures and humanities!), combined with the closeness of the habitus of a publisher to that of a “classical” entrepreneur, could probably explain the issue. We also observed that a “domestic” critic occurred to express harsher judgements than a “foreign” one about the efforts of Bulgarian literature to strive marginalisation and its capacity to affirm itself (of course, these cases cannot support any generalisations, but we regard them as symptomatic).

We tried to put the Bulgarian case against the context of similar ones: the Georgian, the Latvian, the Lithuanian and, partially, the Czech. For reasons outside our control only the first one is represented here.

3. We attempted to conceptualise the notion of a “small” literature assuming a “relational” approach and evading “cataphatic” definitions. In other words, we tried to view a “small” literature not in itself but through its coexistence with and relation to two other kinds of literature which we designated as “minor” and “big”.

The dividing of literatures into “small” and “big” (still? already?) raises objections in the scholarly community (at least in Bulgaria, Georgia and Lithuania, as far as I am aware). Aesthetic value(s), on the one hand, and demographical, political, social or economical quantification, on the other, are intuitively (and not only intuitively) deemed incommensurable. Or, qualification based on a demographic or other quantity is felt to be illegitimate. A contribution to the workshop by Bistra Gančeva (Gančeva 2013) which did not enter the present collection, found support for its chaste and purist position in the late 19th-early 20th century writings of Ivan Šišmanov. In a conversation that resembled a Socratic dialogue another elderly and deeply respected colleague, Nikola Georgiev, hinted at the possibility

⁴ The term indicates the extra-literary factors which contribute to the circulation of a literary work and may enter in dynamic relationship with more specifically literary factors.

of thinking not of “small” literatures, but of literatures which may have both “Čechovian” poetics and “Čechovian” (international) social standing.

Choosing a sociologising perspective seems to us a possible, acceptable compromise. Mastering it helps literary studies (in general) and understanding literatures like the Bulgarian against international context (in particular) evade direct confrontation with the economisation of social existence, which appears to be ever more dominant and to aspire to hegemony, on both the individual and institutional scales, and on the scale of the scholarly guild as well.

We are far from delineating a common philosophical, theoretical or ideological ground to resist both prudent self-isolation and easy economisation of thinking. Nonetheless, all the contributors, with probably one exception, share the intuition that literature, more precisely the literary field experiences the pressure of a double heteronomy: the field of (political) power and the field of economical power, i.e. the market. It is this awareness that lacks in Kees van Rees’ recent theoretically neat and enlightening considerations on the issue of small literatures (Rees 2012). Van Rees sees symptoms of what can be called the tyranny⁵ of an emerging global market but his unpremeditated modernisational and neo-liberal bias prevents him from embedding this observational awareness into a theoretical one⁶. “Significance” and “organisational (under)developedness/capacity” of a national literary field⁷ seem to be quite operative categories in differentiating between “small” and “big” literatures but they also seem to be too dependent on the ideology of modernisation and, less conspicuously, on a belief in the good-doing invisible hand of the market.

The fact that we decided to discuss the uneasy international socialisation of Bulgarian literature means that we accept the ideology, or theory, of modernisation as a socially, not

⁵ Rees 2012: 40, 44, 45. E.g., “economic and cultural developments over the past decades outlined above appear to have a negative effect on an author’s chances of surviving: overproduction, competition among a steadily increasing number of would-be writers, focus on sellers, storage costs, criticism losing symbolic power. These issues are likely to affect literary field’s viability, insofar as they represent a risk to its plurality and diversity [...]” (*Ibid.*: 45).

⁶ In no way he shows that he considers the economic factor a heteronomic one, as regards the field of culture and, in particular, a literary field, cf. *ibid.*: 33, 36. For Van Rees, political tyranny is an abnormal condition but a market tyranny, as it seems, is more than normal – it is not even conceptualised. He fails to discriminate, alongside or behind the right of “freedom of speech”, or of non-punishable speech, the right to be given the possibility to be heard, or the right of just speech, no matter whether punishable or not.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 32. A field’s significance, or its power to cause and to process ripple effects, has too much in common with a will or power for intense transactions/contacts/transfers and a field’s structuredness, or developedness, has too much of division of labour. In brief, “big” literature seems to mean much interliterary communication and/or trade and much intraliterary differentiation. And an open society is much more likely to create a “big” literature than a closed one. And an economically powerful society and/or literary field is much more likely to cause and process ripple effects than an economically powerless one just by the virtue of having better means of material production.

intellectually, inevitable framework of our discussion. However, it is more an inertial and pragmatic quasi-consensus than a premeditated theoretical awareness. This is witnessed by the lack of tension in addressing the issue of (non)translatability and by the non-addressing of the theory/ideology of modernisation vis-à-vis translational studies and a small literature's interliterary status.

4. Among the essays presented here, the one by Jana Bukova explicitly challenges the tripartite typology of literatures suggested at the outset, as well as the crypto-political agenda leaning behind this typology and behind the hints given in the call for papers.

The idea that we live in a world of one hegemonic literature, several dominant (or big), and plenty of small and minorities' literatures is certainly not new⁸. Bukova shares this idea but also relates the notion of a "minor" literature to a different scale. The decision of writers to write or not for a minor literature does not depend on the fact whether they take part in the field of a minority's, a small, a big or a world-hegemonic literature. With this proposition Bukova challenges the belief of the author of this introduction in the oppositional potential of the "small" literatures (yet I still believe in the huge oppositional potential of these literatures when appropriately handled by scholarship, as I hope I will demonstrate in my essay below). At the same time Bukova conveys her commitment to the neo-romantic postmodern belief that literature exists *per se*, that it does not need interpretation or, at least, that it has not been created to serve interpretation. This point of view does not only assert the belief in an literature which is really autonomous; it represents, I am afraid, an underestimation of the trivial possibility that evading interpretation might be an ideological construct that serves a particular kind of interpretation (probably of post-structuralist vein). Trying to bring Bukova's position close to mine, in order to make them communicate, I would reformulate and concretise her thought in the following way: the producers of literary literature do not take into consideration neither the rules of the market nor the political heteronomy; they similarly do not take care of the agenda of the discourse that is closest to the literary one – that of literary criticism.

The rest of the essays we present here are growingly focussed on the phenomenon of "interliterary socialisation" (though leaving it insufficiently conceptualised).

It is this concept and this phenomenon which bring together comparative literature and translation studies, as well as the different agents of literary communication (writer, publisher, translator, scholar and reader). Grasping it requires abandonment of the logic of comparison, to view literatures, artifacts and agents in an interliterary (dis)continuum; and this is congruent with viewing them as instances and factors of an (inter)literary field. In brief, through combining the visions of Dionýz Ďurišin and Pierre Bourdieu we

⁸ In *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London-New York 1999, p. 13), Susan Bassnet and Harish Trivedy speak of "the one master-language of our postcolonial world, English" (cited in Munday 2001: 135).

could succeed in grasping and explaining what might be called the macro-(as)sociability of literature: literature performs/undergoes socialisation and association amidst other discourses and other literatures.

As I already suggested, the different views on the difficulties of small literatures to gain recognition might be due not only to individual or institutional differences; they may be determined by the different locations occupied in the chain of literature (production-transfer-consumption) by those who formulate these views. The central – and interrelated – questions seem to be: First, what is our attitude to the seemingly undisputed Anglo-American global hegemony on the literary market? This attitude varies: from affirmation (grounded on a mix of sobriety and self-content – the latter approximating a kind of explicitly self-affirmative messianism – on an individual scale)⁹, via deliberating who is (or is not) guilty for the “non-liquidity”, the lack of economic, concrete value of one or another literary good, to a quasi-utopian suggestion how to combat the hegemon or at least the lesser lords of the global literary market. And: Second, what is our attitude to the marginalisation of a literary field with which *we* are closely tied?

Developing Maja Gorčeva's thoughts, we come to the conclusion that “small” literatures can take part in the interliterary communication as equals insofar as they have the opportunity to keep on translating not in an assimilative but in a foreignising manner, and as they keep on hoping that the “big” ones will begin translating in the same manner. In other words, being tolerant or even servile towards otherness at home, the “small” can still hope that the “big” in the global village will take the same line of conduct. On the one hand, such a conclusion seems to me moderately affirmative towards the situation of a global hegemony. On the other hand, Gorčeva discerns in the way of acting of the small literatures a revolutionary potential, which definitely is fascinating.

Gorčeva's recurrent idea that the Bulgarian literary field (and especially the subfield of criticism) lacks creative initiative or cunning leads to a discouraging suggestion. “Small” culture occurs to be a hostage of its own lack of talent. Paradoxically, there is some optimism in this suggestion: things go well and everyone takes the place she or he deserves.

Bukova in fact opposes this optimism of Gorčeva arguing that to translate from “small” into “big” languages is against “natural laws”, hence needs additional assets. In other words, the principle of autonomy of the “global”, or the “international”, literary field, if left on its own, will maintain and even accelerate inequality. Thus “small” appear to be in need of heteronomic support (for example, state subsidy or logistics). And the “big” have also relied on it: beforehand. The “small” are incessantly “second” in “literaturising” the political capital and are therefore incessantly to be suspected in violating the autonomy of the field, of the “world literary republic”.

⁹ See below, Cvetanka Elenkova's *The Ark of the Translator*. Besides being a publisher, Elenkova is a translator and a poet.

The essays of Bukova, Gorčeva and Marie Vrinat-Nikolov¹⁰ list and briefly analyse the factors that impede the international socialisation of Bulgarian literature, both internal and external ones. Gorčeva touches upon its low ability and even inability to (re)integrate ethnically Bulgarian writers who have socialised themselves in foreign literary fields (due to emigration); that is, upon what can be called its “repellent capacity”. The reader comes to the conclusion that the Bulgarian literary field has low organisational capacity and low potency to create and process ripple effects, or continuous and spreading results of an event or action¹¹. Each of the essays tries to make its way out of the kind of a psychological deadlock which follows overviews hardly suggesting optimism. Thus, for example, Gorčeva’s scepticism notwithstanding, and facing the case of Bulgarian literature in France, Vrinat-Nikolov is inclined to think that forming a stereotype of the source-culture within the target-culture could be productive. Next, she argues that a translational strategy focussed on recreating a poetics (after H. Meschonnic) could make attractive even an unattractive literature like the Bulgarian in France¹². Lastly, Gorčeva and she suggest exciting reinterpretations of the old alibi of the “small”, the topos of untranslatability... However, more frequently the way out is traced not by explicitly suggesting “what to do” but by pointing at non-mainstream developments and reflections either in literature or in translation theory and practice, which, if followed and developed on an everyday scale, would at least prevent a worsening of the situation: to continue writing “literary” literature (Bukova), to adopt and propagate a “foreignising” yet not “exoticising” strategy of translation (Vrinat-Nikolov), to produce abundantly analytic and not self-exoticising self-representation through selection of texts to translate and through criticism (Gorčeva)... At first glance, Gorčeva does not offer even this minimalist remedy but tries to “break” the vicious circle of emotionally flat complaint through a bit more bitter self-criticism (on behalf of the Bulgarian literary culture and the Bulgarian literary field). However, one can recognise here

¹⁰ *What Place for Bulgarian Literature in the “World Republic of Letters”?* (the contribution is in French).

¹¹ “Such effects may be connected with events in a field, for example, a field’s authors gaining reputation abroad, as is apparent from receiving awards [...] and their work being translated in other languages”; or a field “starting to publish an increasing amount of internationally acclaimed literature from all over the world – not just English, French and German, but from Southern Europe, Latin America and Asia” (Rees 2012: 32). The phrase “internationally acclaimed” neutralises, to a certain extent, the significance of “from all over the world”, for one wonders to which linguistic-cultural universes belong the centres on which the international acclaim of a literary work depends; but we refrain from discussing the issue.

¹² Vrinat-Nikolov’s concern about the strategy of self-exoticisation employed by a number of writers from the Balkans in order to achieve global recognition and about the intellectual credibility of this strategy is one more random contribution to the theory of translation in her essay. It warns in this case against privileging what Venuti called a strategy of “foreignisation” in translation. And it links this translatology issue to a culturological concept which proved productive in investigating a small culture like the Bulgarian one, “self-colonisation”.

a reinforcement of the agenda of a combatant non-conformist literary criticism. And one can recognise the agenda of a combatant non-conformist literary theory in the inquiry on the discursive economy of a small literature, an inquiry backed by the concern about how literary hegemony is possible (Todor Hristov).

To summarise, each of the participants in the forum, more or less overtly, promotes and underscores the importance of her or his habitus in the literary field – the publisher being the most concise and one of the literary scholars the most abundant.

The contribution I just hinted at addresses the surmountability of the condition-under-hegemony, especially with regard to such literatures as the Bulgarian literature. Literary scholars can incite a chain of elective affinities among literatures having a compatible political-economical status (Jordan Ljuckanov), as it has been – I guess successfully – initially attempted about a century and a half ago with the literatures and cultures that have been growingly converting into Slavic (as Tomaš Glanc shows in *Slavic Conversions*, a study partially presented at the Sofia seminar but submitted for publication elsewhere [Glanz 2014]). Yet not the notion of lingual kinship would be the fundamental one this time. If read alongside each other, these two works, as specimens of a *postfactum* deconstructive description and a *prefactum* imaginative prescription respectively, would probably better expose both the benefits and the flaws of these contrasting languages.

If translating (socialising, converting, etc.) a “small” literature is indeed a counter-natural act, as one of the contributors here (Bukova) claims, then can’t we enhance this counter-naturalness and indeed irrationality, to forge interliterary communities against or alongside the mainstream of universalist (and US-English-centrist) “worldling”¹³? Such an attempt would performatively illustrate the relative freedom of the literary (and cultural) field from economical and political determinism.

To return to the range of non-extremist positions, the inquiry of Maria Slavčeva¹⁴, though no less concerned with promoting the importance of one’s habitus for the collective well-being, is particularly important for it shows that the bad standing of Bulgarian literature is not unique; moreover, it offers a glimpse at a Europe-wide bad “mutual” standing of literatures, and thus discourages pessimists.

Slavčeva’s contribution moves us towards a typology of literatures that makes the relational approach denser than in the “minor(ity) – small – dominant – hegemon” tetra-chomy and provides that hypothetic typology with some empirical base. A literature can be “small” or whatsoever just because it is hardly or howsoever visible by others that partake in a particular community, or set, of literatures. This contribution indirectly raises a number of questions that are worth explicating here: Is the “European” interliterary community – insofar as it “exists” – reproducible within the University education and hence translatable to the future? Is the apparent deficiency of mutual “intra-European” literary awareness

¹³ “Worldling” is used here in the sense of Gayatri Spivak, as “the process of letting someone/ being let to enter world history”.

¹⁴ *The Literary Map of Europe: A Poll Among Students* (the contribution is in German).

ascribable to an overall decline of learning and reading and how is this deficiency shaped by the processes of globalisation and European integration? Can we map the “blind spots” of interliterary imagination, and after all, of interliterary field? Why are literatures unaware of each other: is that due to some kind of substantial incompatibility or to incompatibility of positions within a community? (Consider a hypothetic “rule” whereby a periphery and a margin are invisible to a periphery and a margin).

The essay of Irine Modebadze¹⁵ encourages (non-extremist) optimists. The international socialisation of Georgian literature in the recent years, and its interliterary relocation, due to a policy of state support for translating native literature into foreign languages, has proved more or less successful.

An alternative solution would be to rethink the interliterary frame within which a literature is conceived. To return to our case, Bulgarian literature has been conceived during the last one and a half century as Slavic, Balkan, post-Soviet-block, and European; it can be claimed that none of these strategies can be symbolically profitable now and that Bulgarian literature has to be relocated to an interliterary community yet to be invented.

We guess that, compared to the situation of the nineteenth century, when the still most influential identification, the Slavonic one, gained dominance, the field of cultural production today – at least Europe-wide – is more vulnerable to the pressure of the field of economical than of political power. And we guess that such constitutively marginal agents of the field of literary production as literary scholars have more power to impulse shifts in it in a situation of prevalently political pressure. But maybe we are wrong – and not only when we engage in overgeneralisations.

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Abstract

Jordan Ljuckanov

Introduction: Translating a Small Literature to the Global Market: The Bulgarian Case and Beyond

The A. presents a group of papers on the issues of translating a small literature to the global market. To the question of how a "small" literature (more especially here Bulgarian literature) can achieve international success, he answers from the perspectives of a number of habituses in the field of literary production and consumption. A "small" literature can gain international success through: individual talent (especially for marketing); irrational struggle against market and geopolitical rationales; intellectual maturing of the original literary field; inventing a label to combat the inertia of the international literary field (or a clever instrumentalisation of the proclivity to produce and consume exoticisms); dislocating itself from an interliterary community that cannot offer the necessary support of a cultural capital; inciting the existence of a suitable interliterary community and relocating itself therein; improving education in humanities; conducting responsible state policy; abandoning the illusion that "the world republic of letters" can be independent from the economy of maximizing profit; refusing to subject to the judgements of the dominant literatures.

Keywords

Small Literature; Global Market; Translation.