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Bulgarian Literature as World Literature. Edited by Mihaela P. Harper and Dimitar Kambourov. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, iv + 283 pp. ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-4810-5; ePDF: 978-1-5013-4812-9; eBook: 978-1-5013-4811-2.

Bulgarian Literature as World Literature is an impressive collection, part of the Bloomsbury series Literatures as World Literature under the general editorship of Thomas Beebee, and the first of its kind compiled with the aim of making Bulgarian literature more conspicuous globally. The volume consists of twenty-two chapters by critics and historians of Bulgarian literature, a Foreword by Maria Todorova, an Introduction with separate sections authored by each of the editors and an Afterword by Galin Tihanov. The editors, Mihaela Harper and Dimitar Kambourov, start out with two goals, which they fulfill: to "offer to an English-speaking reader this unique edited collection on Bulgarian literature from its genesis to the present," and to promote "a minor national literature to global visibility and recognition" (1). Though the volume focuses on Bulgarian literature, its scope is much larger in three ways: first, in extending the literary analysis to cultural analytics; second, in focusing on the forceful cultural interactions between the local and the global from a historical and geopolitical perspective; third, in examining cultural production, which includes the publishing and dissemination of literary texts, as a reflection of power dynamics in a globalized world.

The chapters are formally grouped into four sections, entitled respectively, Histories: In Search of a National Profile of World Literature; Geographies: Bulgarian Literature as Un/common Ground within and without; Economies: Bulgarian Literature and the Global Market; Genetics: Bulgarian Literature's Heredities, Affinities, and Prospects. This division reflects the eclectic and polyphonic tone of the volume, which the bifocal Introduction initiates. In expressing their personal motivation and experience as editors of the volume, both Harper and Kambourov

emphasize their vision of Bulgarian literature and culture emerging from obscurity. Within the four sections traversing the uneven terrain of Bulgarian literature, the individual essays do just that by choosing different approaches, either contextualizing the material they discuss in a larger framework or resorting to a close reading of individual writers, while focusing on thematic and formal concerns.

Several essays can be grouped together based on their thematic preoccupation with literature and nation-building. Diana Atanassova covers the period from the ninth century through the Middle Ages up to the fall of the country under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Raymond Detrez continues the examination of literary production during the period between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century: the pre-national one followed by the development of a national literature within the process of nation-formation. Marie Vrinat-Nikolov's text proposes a different approach by adopting a transnational perspective, arguing against tightly delineated national boundaries, but claiming instead that Bulgarian literature reflects "a multilingual, multi-confessional, and multicultural ensemble characterized by an impressive circulation of people, ideas, texts and languages" (41). Milena Kirova continues chronologically with the period between Bulgaria's gaining national independence in 1878 to the First World War by focusing expressly on the attempts at the Europeanization of Bulgarian literature by Ivan Vazov, Pencho Slaveykov, and several Bulgarian women writers. Darin Tenev revisits Slaveykov in the final section, Genetics.

Boyko Penchev continues along the same line of exploration by focusing on the dichotomy between two major tendencies in Bulgarian literature: one aiming at the preservation of "the native roots of Bulgarianness" and the other driving towards its Europeanization (81). This dichotomy resurfaces in the analysis of Bilyana Kourtasheva, who discusses the anthologizing of Bulgarian literature as part of the process of selecting works that are perceived as representative of Bulgarian literature to the world. The emergence and conspicuousness of women authors is explored in several essays apart from Kirova's, notably by Miglena Nikolchina who writes on Dora Gabe and Elisaveta Bagryana as the first women poets, while Julia Kristeva's text offers a reflection on another prominent Bulgarian poet, Blaga Dimitrova. Kristeva herself is one of the writers Nikolchina discusses, and so does Yana Hashamova, whose

"Diaspora Writers and Readers" features also the Bulgarian-born Kapka Kassabova and the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić.

A major thematic concern that can be traced through several contributions in this volume is the representation of Bulgaria in Bulgarian literature from the distance of time – an exploration of the country's past, and from the distance of space – an exploration from the perspective of the migrant and the travel writer. Todor Hristov develops his survey along the lines of a cross-cultural comparison by including Bulgarian travel writing as an exemplary form of self-reflection. Preeminently, this survey includes Aleko Konstantinov, who visited the Chicago World Exhibition in 1893, but also Konstantin Konstantinov, Georgi Danailov, Marko Semov and others. Ani Burova's analysis is also set within a comparative framework as she examines how the Bulgarian writers Ancho Kaloyanov, Vladimir Zarev, Georgi Gospodinov, Vladislav Todorov, Alek Popov, and Stefan Kisyov portray the Bulgarian past, alongside the treatment of the same topic by other writers from Central and Eastern Europe. Burova includes in her analysis several contemporary Bulgarian émigré writers who deal with the same issues: Ilija Trojanow, Kapka Kassabova, Rouja Lazarova and Miroslav Penkov, but who have significantly chosen to write in a language different from their native tongue. This exploration follows previously published ones by Nikolaj Aretov (2010) and Alexandra Glavanakova (2016). A thought-provoking perspective both on the themes of the past and of the Bulgarian self in translation in the writings by these Bulgarian émigré writers, as well as in the novels by Dimitré Dinev and Nikolay Grozni, is taken by Dimitar Kambourov. He discusses predominantly these authors' "monsterization of the communist past" as "opposed to their focus on patriarchal values and the family" (177). Kambourov makes the viable point that "The exodus of millions of Bulgarians to the West and the shifting self-perception of the nation as the Third World within the First World have also had their cultural and literary repercussions" (10).

A couple of chapters focus on a single author. Vassil Vidinsky, Maria Kalinova and Kamelia Spassova discuss the avant-garde writer of the 1920s, Kiril Krastev, while Miroslav Penkov's English-language story collection *East of the West* representative of the irresolvable glocal fusion is the subject of Mihaela Harper's chapter. The volume also provides the views of the most prominent contemporary Bulgarian writer, Georgi

Gospodinov, who is widely translated and published abroad, as well as of one the most prominent contemporary translators of Bulgarian literature into the English language, Angela Rodel, who has rendered two of Gospodinov's books, *The Physics of Sorrow* and *Time Shelter* into English. In 2023, the English version of *Time Shelter* became the first Bulgarian-language novel to both be nominated for and win the International Booker Prize. Reflecting on Bulgaria as "this empty space between Istanbul, Vienna, and Budapest" (239), Gospodinov provides his motivation for writing:

> Sadness and fear are reasonable motives for writing. And what I think literature can do today, Bulgarian literature included, is to have the courage to stand on the losing side. I find this to be an important feature of European literature, one that we inherited from Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf . . . Let's remember that the best part about literature is that it avoids easy explanations of the world. Literature is not afraid to speak of life's weak points, of sin, sorrow, guilt, and transience. (246)

Gospodinov's text on the proverbial Bulgarian sadness is counterposed by a brief reflection on Bulgarian liveliness by Jean-Luc Nancy, followed by another response from Cory Stockwell. The texts in the final section, Genetics, succeed in entering in a conversation with one another especially on issues concerning what is unique about Bulgarian mentality and its reflection in literary works.

It has to be noted that the collection contributes to the expansive and rather contentious field of world literature not only by providing historical surveys and comparative perspectives but by partaking in scholarly (Todorova, Licheva, Kiossev, Kambourov, Tihanov) and personal (Dvoryanova) debates on a conceptual level. The argument about terminology expands to include contending notions such as "minor" literatures versus "small" literatures and Third World literature. There seems to be a general agreement among the contributors that the minority status of a literature is interpreted in three distinct ways, as clearly formulated by Tihanov: (1) a literature written in a language that does not have a wide readership; (2) a literature perceived as small and derivative, deprived of its originality; (3) in the case of Bulgarian literature, however, to be distinguished from the meaning with which the term has been vested

by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, namely as the force that questions from within an already institutionally stable national language.

Kambourov destabilizes the notion of world literature from the very beginning by questioning in the Introduction whether it is not "intended to overcome occidentalism in the literary canon, while preserving the driver's seat for European classics and contemporary western literary production, and still enlivening the western literary stagnation of the post-creative writing epoch?" (7). His question foregrounds the main complication of compiling such a collection, especially one which aims to depart from the conventional Western-centric models of binary oppositions in favor of what has been advanced as the networked vision on world literature, in particular by Wai Chee Dimock in her exploration of American literature as world literature (201). Todorova points out in the Foreword another important aspect of the same issue—that there is a palpable tone of defensiveness in some of the contributions, as the Bulgarian local has often been experienced and represented as provincialism and self-colonization. There is an established tradition of perceiving Bulgarian literature in this self-deprecating manner as evidenced in earlier publications by Alexander Kiossev (2008), Vladimir Trendafilov (2008), Dimiter Kenarov (2008), Jordan Ljuckanov (2014), among others. The terminological ramifications pertaining to status and prestige in the historical development of Bulgarian literature in the last decade are also central to Kiossev's contribution to the collection that deals specifically with the issue of self-colonization (ix, xii). His text reflects on the shift in Bulgaria's self-image, traditionally "connected to a ceaseless catching up with an imaginary center, which epitomized world progress, 'civilization,' and 'culture'" (160). Despite successfully overcoming these self-colonizing tendencies in recent years marked by the loss of the ideal 'other' of western Europe, Kiossev concludes that only individual Bulgarian writers (Georgi Gospodinov, Alex Popov, Vladislav Todorov) have applied successful strategies, including marketing strategies, for world recognition. He foresees quite pessimistically that the globalization and "omnivorous" commercialization of literary production can lead to the loss of the Bulgarian language, and that the literature written in it will be "left out of the global race" (169). For Tihanov, who argues for the repositioning of Bulgarian literature as Balkan, Slavic, and East European within the geopolitical power structures, it is the market

economy, which dictates what is to be published and promoted, as the "canonical and the marginal are at the mercy of the market, fueling its insatiable appetite for domesticated novelty and controllable originality" (265).

A more controlled curation of the essays would have probably ensured that a greater variety of texts and authors could have been covered outside the presumed 'canonical' past and present Bulgarian writers. Utilizing the perspective of transculturality and cultural translation, adopted by many Bulgarian scholars in Anglophone, Germanic, and Romance Studies, who have explored the reception of Bulgarian literature in translation within these respective cultures, as well as a deeper analysis of the literature written by writers of Bulgarian origin in languages other than Bulgarian, could be another meaningful avenue for exploration in the context of world literature.

Bulgarian Literature as World Literature succeeds in destabilizing the traditional labels used for stereotyping Bulgarian literature, while contextualizing it historically, geographically, and culturally. Apart from revealing to the world "the last terra incognita of East European literature" (Kenarov 2008), the collection also partakes in the larger discussion questioning the very existence of a world literature beyond its strictly commercialized value.

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