

The Return of the Translated Text or the Return of the Novel

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May 2, 2017, Lancaster

The novel is Europe's creation; its discoveries, though made in various languages, belong to the whole of Europe. The sequence of discoveries (not the sum of what was written) is what constitutes the history of the European novel. It is only in such a supranational context that the value of a work (that is to say, the import of its discovery) can be fully seen and understood.

Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, Folio, 1995, p. 16



- It is commonly thought that any literary production is intended for the readers of the country where it was born. If a translation of this work exists, it can also be read by foreign readers; however, the initial addressees remain the readers from the country of origin. Translation is, to a certain extent, a second recognition of the work.
- Yet, the literary work can also be thought (narrative structure, themes, linguistic and syntactic structure, etc.) and produced (samizdat, unpublished manuscripts, manuscripts circulating within literary circles, edition in extremely limited numbers, not to say confidential or self-published author(s), etc.) for foreign readers or readers who are marginalized in the country where they live, which means destined to be translated from the very start. Therefore, translation is only the achievement of an intended objective.



- Translations circulate in a more or less controlled way in different countries. They can be retranslated again in various languages but they always end up coming back to the writer's country of origin, either as the translated version of the text, or as the original version of the text.
- As for the author, he/she does not necessarily leave his/her country of origin. It is/her work that crosses borders because, we believe, it embodies a narrative structure and universal themes which transcend mere national categorizations.



- The national author, who sees his/her work being recognized through a translation in one or several major languages of communication, will gain notoriety in his/her country. This translation will represent, for the country of origin, an international acknowledgment of a national production, and hence of national literature (even though, very often, these translations remain unnoticed in the countries where they are translated, in other words, with no real reception). However, in order to maintain this notoriety and international recognition, the author's other works need to be published as well. Otherwise, the translation of only one work will bring the author and his/her work back to the national limits, which will also mean the limits of the author. In this context, even though the work was intended for national readers, the international recognition obtained through translation forces the readers from the country of origin to read it differently and to grant it a privileged position. The translation thus becomes a means of adding value to national literature.



- Thousands of novels have been published there and some have been very successful, but these novels “add nothing to the conquest of being” and “do not participate in the *sequence of discoveries* anymore”; which Kundera calls “the history of the novel”. These novels which are excluded from this history “are *novels after the end of the history of the novel*”.
- Authors who wish to write novels exploring all the possibilities of existence have to, either leave the country and write their novels abroad, or find a way to have their novels translated in order to enter the history of the novel. For a long time now, these authors have left their country of origin through their inner exile in language and literature; hence the constant sense of non-authenticity. Language and literature become their homeland.
- *Ibidem*.
- Danilo Kiš: “The infamy of cosmopolitanism, which has a very particular significance in Eastern countries, made me ‘dissident and stateless’ everywhere; I had to find and I found, out of necessity, my one and only country in the European cultural heritage. I have searched and I think I have found my roots and my title of nobility in literature.” In *Bitter Residue of Experience*, Fayard, 1995, p.156. Cf. see *Homo poeticus*, 1993, p.101.



- The Balkans, known as Eastern countries, have experienced the most despotic political systems. This is also where, since the beginning of the twentieth century, several genocides have been perpetrated and where ethnocides continue to be perpetrated. Literary creation, which one could precisely call “literary production”, could exist only if it conformed to state ideology. According to Milan Kundera, these countries were not propitious to the novel, to *the spirit of the novel*.



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- Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981), one of the most prominent writers from the former Yugoslavia, wrote his first novel entitled *The Return of Filip Latinovitch*, while traveling from January 19 to February 9 1932 in the calm of Prague and the complete solitude of Zbraslava. He had written dramas and short stories; however, writing a novel required a departure, conferring on the novel a unique status. When referring to writers, Krleža said the following: “In order to carry out one’s duty properly, the writer needs to be, in a way, dissident, even defeatist with regard to the State and institutions, as well as the Nation and the authorities. The writer is the prodigal son who comes back home only to leave again. One can hardly understand that refusal is his familiar way of accepting the world. Yet, he can only be helped by those who are able to understand this precise truth.” If the novel can be born only in an “elsewhere”, it is precisely because this “elsewhere” is a synonym for the place of all the possibilities. Created in an “elsewhere”, it is nevertheless intended for a “return” to the place of origin; hence the title.



- Thus, becoming a genuine writer requires an actual exile or an inner one in order to escape from the censorship, pressure, and the dangerous uniformity of *nova lingua*. In order to write differently and have a critical vision, the writer must get away, stand back, and take some distance. Danilo Kiš, who called himself *the only Yugoslavian writer*, agrees with the previous statement: “I simply wanted to live in another country—like so many other writers have done before me [...] I am taking an oblique look at the events occurring there, or here, or in Europe in general. In any case, it is a distant look. And even when I am here, I observe everything with a certain distance.” This is what he calls “to give oneself a healthy/safe distance” in order to heal from mental sclerosis caused by national ideology: “In this sense, my stay in Paris was valuable to me, it was a sort of mental convalescence, a sort of exile, in the Joyce sense of the term—to observe one’s own world with a high degree of objectivity, that is to say with love and without pity”.



- The figure of the prodigal child is integrated within the metaphor of nation as far as “small” nations are concerned. Motherland is “our home” said Krleža and “a big family” said Kundera, and each writer, before asserting their sense of individuality, represent a child of the national community whose status and role will be determined by and according to this community: “Hidden behind their inaccessible languages, small European nations (their life, history, culture) are not very well known; one naturally thinks that the main handicap regarding the international recognition of their art lies there. However, the reverse is true: this art is handicapped because everybody places it within the big national family picture (compatriots as well as foreigners criticize it and historiography it) and does not allow it to escape from this image. Gombrowicz: his foreign critics try very hard to explain his work by discussing Polish nobility, Polish baroque, etc., etc. As Proguidis [Lakis Proguidis] points out, they “polonize” him, “repolonize” him, pushing him back, towards the *small national context*. Yet, it is not the knowledge of Polish nobility but the knowledge of modern world novel (that is, the knowledge of the *larger context*) which will allow us to understand the novelty and the value of the Gombrowiczian novel.” This family is also ruthless with its members. They keep a close watch on each other; each one of them envies any sign of freedom displayed by another member. The slightest deviation, the slightest sign of rebellion is a matter that concerns the family and “if a family does not manage to defeat the unloved son, it humiliates him with maternal forgiveness.”



- However, the hero Filip Latinovitch, after having been symbolically expelled from paradise (the maternal home) by his mother because of a sin—which suggests, in subtext, the author himself being expelled from his homeland (that is, his motherland) for having sinned through his opinions, his writings, his struggle and his political involvements--, comes back, as the prodigal child, in the guise of a renown painter who signs “Philippe”, French style. His international renown, that is his new name, allows him to return to Croatia, but he is not truly recognized by the Croatians, his compatriots. Yet, following the Gospel parable, the prodigal child comes back to paternal home after a long absence and a life full of “debauchery”, along with acts which have been “condemned”, “forbidden” and considered “licentious” and “asocial”, in the hopes of finding understanding there. In the novel, he will be recognized, in other words understood, only when he will save a bull from fire, after having heard the ancient and forgotten Kajkavian word (Croatian dialect): « *ogenj* (fire) ». This old word awakens in Filip “a very strong sense of attachment to the country. Without knowing why, at that very moment, he strongly felt how much he subjectively and ineluctably depended on that soil: he felt at home. Then, it came to him naturally; in a surge of solidarity, encouraged by the certainty of belonging to Kostanjevets, he dressed up quickly and ran into the night”. He is not the “solitary” man from foreign cities; his foreign status dissolves and he all of a sudden becomes “solidary”, standing in solidarity with the Croatian farmer community. By re-appropriating the Croatian language, he becomes a Croatian supporting the Croatian farmer and consequently being recognized by them. He became “famous overnight. For the people there he was, from now on, the gentleman who had saved Hitrets’ bull.”



- In terms of literature, would that mean that the author is fully aware that he/she is bringing the novel back to its international and “universal” dimension and it cannot be recognized as such since the novel in question is not well-known? This novel created abroad is considered a foreign novel. Also, is it not perceived as an “import” product, foreign, in the same way as the “un-translations”? Only the language itself is recognized; however, is this enough for the novel to be understood? Nevertheless, as this “untranslation” is the creation of a naïve writer, it will be exploited for the promotion of national literature, gaining the same credibility as other literature with international renown.
- As far as the writer is concerned, he/she seems to be aware that the existence of his/her writing depends on the “return”; a permanent return, since this return enables a better departure. This return allows the writer to bring the novel to the place where it is banned and render its existence possible through “un-translation” or at least what is perceived as such. Due to the incomprehension he/she has to face, he/she does not have any other choice but to leave again in order to find the possible conditions for his/her creation.



- Zoran Kovatchevski, a contemporary Macedonian author, in his short story “Aristotle from Ressens” (Aristotel od Resen)--also the title of the collection--questions “the return of reflective thinking” through the return of the native intellectual. In this short story, Aristotle is unknown in Ressens (a small town in Macedonia). In fact, he is a compatriot who has been abroad and comes back in order to bring “the thinking process” that has been “stolen even before his birth”, but “brought to its original source”. This reflection can indeed get dirty and dusty. His project does not seem to correspond to the fundamental concerns of those whom he would like to make his “first students”, as they are overwhelmed by the routine and worldly issues. Aristotle, who has sacrificed ten finest years of his life abroad, would like to, maybe, put into practice the system Aristotle had developed in his time. According to him, “imitation [...] implies an ascending kind of relation through which the inferior individual attempts to fulfill himself/herself, with the resources available to him/her, to a little bit of perfection that he/she perceives within superior elements.”
- However, Aristotle’s imitation is problematic as far as the relation between philosophy and his own thinking process is concerned. “Aristotle that we know,” said P. Aubenque “is not the man who lived in the 4th c. B.C., a philosopher philosophizing among men, but a more or less anonymous *corpus* which was edited in the 1st c. B.C. There are no other examples in history where the philosopher has been so isolated from his own philosophy. When it comes to Aristotle, we are indeed accustomed to neither the philosophy called as such, nor the effective philosophical approach, but to a *philosopheme*, that is the late remains of a philosophy that we have quickly forgotten belonged to an *existing* man”.



- If we transpose Kovatchevski's questioning, as well as the notions of *corpus* and *philosopheme* in their broadest sense, and apply them to literature, we can notice a criticism of those who think that "universal" literature is only possible outside the country and one has to go in search of it abroad and bring it to the country of origin and attempt to spread it, or to "sow it again".
- When Aristotle from Ressens attempts to encourage Macedonians to reach higher thinking spheres by introducing himself as the double of Aristotle the Stagirite, he does not manage to become the superior means at all, only the middle one who, hence, does not deserve imitation but disapproval, mockery or simply indifference in terms of his double/anonymous status. He does not represent the "universal"; he imposes a model by importing it, even though he thinks he has "brought it back".



- In her *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova, when mentioning writers from areas removed from literary capitals, addresses their means of “measuring literary time” by distinguishing between real time and fictional time. For these writers, the “present” is “determined by the highest critical bodies in charge of legitimizing legitimate books, that is contemporary ones.”
- The writer, Octavio Paz, who has been taken as an example, expresses his discovery of a central time, which serves as a measure, and of an off-center time which has been sidelined. The real time, characterized by its ability to unify the politic, the artistic, and the historic, “imposes to everyone the common measure of an absolute time and relegates the other temporalities (national, familial, intimate...) to an outer space”. Once the author measures this time, he/she who wishes to follow it by creating a work of “the present” is forced to search for it in order to bring it back to his/her country: “The quest for the present is not the search for a paradise on earth or of an eternity without dates: it is the quest for the true reality [...]. It was necessary to pursue it and bring it back to our lands”.
- According to P. Casanova, this quest is all about “one’s departure from ‘fictional time’ attributed to national space and access to international competition”.
- According to Casanova, Paz succeeds in his quest thanks to the Nobel Prize he won in 1990, the greatest literary recognition. As Casanova points out, he manages to import the “true present” to his country through this international recognition and by becoming the analyst of “Mexicanity” in his various essays. Certainly, his international renown allows Paz, as well as his poetry and prose work, to be present everywhere, even in his country. However, could we really say, that the reception of Paz’s work is real in his own country?
- Casanova agrees that writers whose works are restricted to national temporality and, who, therefore, only take into account the “norms and national limits assigned to literary practices”, do not know both this real time referring to international laws and the most contemporary creations which are the result of aesthetic revolutions. As a result, we believe that it is impossible for them to know the novel, or any other work, which explores all the possibilities of being in its contemporaneity.



- However, it is not enough to measure a “real time” in order to be able to integrate it. The literary capitals seem to perceive the writers from the peripheries as “opinion reporters”, dissidents, or melting pots of exoticism. Those writers are considered “sexy” as long as they live under a totalitarian regime, denounce it or make war. However, as soon as these regimes end and the walls separating us fall, these writers do not deserve any attention anymore. Peripheral, Eastern, or Balkan writers need to be *homo politicus*. They are recognized through their engaged works which, thus, meet the expectations of literary capitals: “We Europeans have enough literature, and even really good ones; them, what-are-their-names, the Serbo-Things, they need to write about the so-called thorny themes. They should tease their leaders and criticize their system, tell us about a political scandal taking place in an exotic background...”



- Danilo Kiš chooses to enter the literary world with *The Attic*, the title of the book considered his first novel. We believe that his first novel is *Psalm 44*. The choice of his first novel by Kiš is a conscious and theorized decision. In fact, he refuses to be a writer who is qualified as such and such or “a ghetto writer”. However, writing *Psalm 44* was, according to him, “a major mistake” which he is determined to fix later on by establishing the distance required by the literary work. “Distance” will become one of his most important literary devices. *Psalm 44* could have made him “a Jewish writer”, “a minority writer”, that is a writer named through adjectives. Yet, minority literature “is threatened by the potential danger of the pathos and grandiloquence”, in other words of inexistence caused by oblivion. This is why, the author refused to translate this work (it only exists in Hungarian because it was intended for a competition organized by the Jewish Association of Belgrade—Kiš is Jewish Hungarian from his father side). It will only be translated in a future edition of his complete works prepared by Kiš himself, as a document.”



- Plagiarism is another condemnation that authors, who have attempted to create a novel integrating all the contemporary literary innovations, have to suffer. It is in fact a subtle method used by totalitarian regimes whose goal is to attack the writer on his/her own ground. By denying the author's literary competences, even though this writer has long been exiled in literature and made literature his/her only homeland, these regimes attempt to deprive him/her of his/her existence. A writer, who has written a novel breaking with the norms of national universe, becomes the enemy of the nation. His/her work, through its thematic and structural difference, is viewed as a criticism of the existing system. Yet, as criticism is the weapon used by the foreigner, the writer in question only recreates, "copies" the works and thoughts of foreigners. It is neither a matter of disregarding literary innovations, nor an aesthetical delay in these countries which condemn their writers of plagiarism. It is a matter of refusing the difference and creative freedom which condemn the existing works in order to open up to other possibilities. Sometimes, translators can help the State in that respect, if they adhere to the established ideology. The accusation of plagiarism made against Kiš when his novel, *A Gravestone for Boris Davidovitch*, came out, perfectly illustrates this point.



- In the context of migration, if writers carry on writing in their first language, it does not mean that they are writing for the readers who speak this language; they may consider translating their literary creation. In other words, their works would be intended for the readership of the host country. If they adopt the language of the host country, or any other major language of distribution, this does not mean that their work has not been translated.
- On the contrary, the first act of translation is performed by the writer himself/herself, as he/she has chosen to write in a language that is not his/hers. When they use the language of the host country (sometimes they even translate or revise their own work), it is because they claim a place in world literature. As they are concerned with their creative and innovative contribution, they wish to translate it themselves, faithfully, highlighting their differences, instead of resorting to a translation which may homogenize or standardize their work and writing.



- Translation or self-translation is not a literalization of their work, as defined by Casanova: “any operation—translation, self-translation, transcription, writing directly in the dominant language—through which a text, from a country with no literary support, manages to impose itself as literature by legitimate authorities. No matter the language in which they are written, these texts have to be “translated”, that is, they have to obtain a certificate of literacy” since it is not only a literary work; we will even call it *transliteration*.
- Through self-translation, the revision of the translation, or translation, when its quality is undeniable, the writer asserts his/her presence and participation in literary discoveries. Thanks to the “major” languages of communication and distribution, he/she attempts to make his/her creations accessible to a large number of people. It is a literature that would, later on, inevitably return to the country of origin where its presence is denied, banned, or simply impossible.



- The novel which returns as a translated text, as a novel which explores all the possibilities of existence, although present, is not, as we have seen, always understood. Its return can lead to misunderstandings: “I felt a strange and malicious pleasure at seeing myself ride back into my native land on a donkey of misunderstanding.”