



## Review Essay

**Mihaela P. Harper and Dimitar Kambourov, Editors. *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 283.**

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The essay reviews a recent collection of seminal critical readings of Bulgarian literature as “world literature.” Published by Bloomsbury Academic, the volume under discussion contributes to the study of the dynamic interaction of “minor” literatures with local, regional, and wider manifestations of global literary space. It is organized in four sections of thematic contributions authored by scholars from Bulgaria and beyond that discuss historical, geographical, economic, and genetic processes in the development of Bulgarian literature. The review follows the sections closely, and is attentive to specific phenomena, positions, texts, and contexts that render the concept of “minor literature” negotiable and open to reformulations. As most of the static labels are nowadays flushed into the conglomerate of “marginocentricity” and the reality of “quality literature” is no longer a criterion in the admission of local literatures to worldwide prominence, literary circulation has, to a great extent, become a function of the global market. The publication of the reviewed volume is the outcome of a vigorous effort to establish Bulgaria’s literary location within these processes and beyond them.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian literature, world literature, translation, exophony, world-conscious writing, “marginocentricity,” mainstream and experimental writing.

The question of how we think about literature is inevitably linked to another daunting query: what kind of a world will there be for it? As heated academic debates continue to map and unmap the uncertain territory of “world literature(s)” through theoretical models that struggle with the unfathomable immensity of the literary material, “world space” is more and more problematically represented by narratives of englobing self-sufficiency. A plurality of “worlds” is rather needed to account for both the dynamic crossovers and for the more insular forms of cultural significance, the “hegemonic” literatures with the enhanced circulation of their languages, and the so called “minor” literatures whose “minority” is largely a matter of perception. The fluctuating perspectives on world literature(s) ensue from a constellation of seminal critical formulations provided by world famous literary theorists, such as David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Christopher Prendergast, and Matthias Freise.

*Bulgarian Literature as World Literature*, edited by Mihaela Harper and Dimitar Kambourov, enters this uncertain but prolific area of academic research as a timely, and even overdue, collection of critical writings on a “minor” literature, authored by scholars from Bulgaria and beyond. Thus, the very initiative of locating Bulgarian literature in a larger space benefits from a dialogue between interpretative positions within international scholarship.

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As relatively few translations of Bulgarian literary texts circulate in world literary space and exophonic<sup>1</sup> writing has started developing more intensively only recently, Bulgarian literature cannot be fully “redeemed” from its rarity and continues to be one of those literatures whose relative insularity seems to open itself to world readings less smoothly.

Some scepticism concerning the “worlding” of Bulgarian literature and the term “world literature” itself is expressed by the eminent Bulgarian American historian Maria Todorova, who is the author of the Foreword to the volume. However, Todorova’s scepticism is definitely of the healthy variety and helps us understand better the complexity of most of the issues involved in the positioning of Bulgarian literature within a worldly setting.

The sceptical mood of the Foreword is partially dispelled by an interpretation of world literature which Mihaela Harper and most other contributors to the volume apparently accept and by which they are guided: Mathias Freise’s view of world literature as a dynamic system of multiple relationships and not as a static composition of constituent elements (Harper 3). Due to the interactive and dynamic aspects of the literary text itself, a more flexible and less parochial reading of literature becomes possible where “location” gives way to “transition,” and “literature” is no longer seen as a “place,” but as an itinerary that crosses other itineraries on the regional, European, and wider maps of movements. This sense of mobility is reflected in the attempts, more or less successful, to fend off the haunting anxiety of the “minority” syndrome that turns out to be indispensable for a just and unbiased articulation of local literary voices.

The volume is organized as a multilayered narrative that presents Bulgarian literature as world literature in four consecutive sections: “Histories,” “Geographies,” “Economies,” and “Genetics.” A central concern in all of them is the necessity to establish how contextual specifics and the specific aspects of Bulgarian literature can help read world literature and how the reverse direction of reading is likewise possible. In this sense, the attempts at “opening up” the Bulgarian literary text to the “world” and the reciprocal reception of world literature(s) in the local space tend to be mostly interpretative, and where translations are missing, a certain comparative juxtaposition is established as regards plot, genre, writing techniques, and strategies. As Amelia Licheva, quoting Tim Parks, puts it in her chapter, “the ability [of local authors] to write globally is also a point of entry into world literature” (68), and such local works may have an impact that extends far beyond the national limits and limited territories.

While this may be an example of “glocalization,” that is, considering both the “local” and “global” characteristics of the discussed texts, the critical observations and evaluations of the “times,” “places,” “languages,” “movements,” inclusions, exclusions, and negotiations in Bulgarian literature as world literature stray from the naïve assumption that these relationships can be taken as a given. Rather, most of the contributors, while discussing a specific stage, period, movement, genre, writers, and literary works, are anxious to locate the space of uncertainty, the fictional itinerary that some of these relationships may suggest in the attempts to construct a national and international space for Bulgarian literature.

The volume’s first section, whose full title is “Histories: In Search of a National Profile of World Literature,” includes readings that explore the conflicting relationships between “locality,” “regionality,” and the wider spaces, in a historical sequence. It opens with a critical account of medieval Bulgarian culture structured around the fulcrum of the alphabet that permitted the Slavs to write in their native language. As Diana Atanassova suggests, this process is rendered by medieval texts as an experience of sanctification in which the space of Bulgarian ethnicity was produced as a supra-national formation. A number of hagiographies, for instance, would ascribe apostolic properties to Cyril and Methodius and their disciples presenting their missionary work as a linguistic baptism of diverse peoples – through the alphabet – into the Christian world, ethnically particularized and further configured by the myth of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term “exophonic” is used by the translator and translation theorist Chantal Wright to designate texts by writers writing in a language that is not their “native” or “mother” tongue. See her book *Literary Translation* in which the term is used with reference to Tsveta Sofronieva and other poets writing in German (15, 16, 25, 136, 137, 138, 139, 154, 180). The term is not used by the contributors to *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature*.

“chosen people.” Thus, a sacred history was imagined for the Bulgarians as a local version of the myth, projecting an inclusive, regional, pan-Slavic location of the Bulgarian ethnicity.

The second chapter in this section, entitled “Bulgarian Literature in a ‘Romaic’ Context” and authored by Raymond Detrez, traces a reverse process of dispersal of Bulgarian national features in the colonial world of the Ottoman empire from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Detrez, however, locates this dispersal within the imperial limits and from the vantage point of imperial rule. He suggests that national dissolution took place as a strategy of survival within the larger religious supra-national communities of the *Romaicans* (Orthodox Christians), Turks, Armenians, Manicheans, and Jews. Among them, the Bulgarian ethnic self-location would succumb to the religious self-consciousness common to all members of the Romaic community. Consequently, most of the Bulgarian literary and cultural production at that time was referred to as “Romaic” and few definite markers of ethnicity remained, language being one of them. Though soundly underpinned by historical evidence and instrumental to this study, this homogenizing perspective borrowed from the imperial repertoire may turn problematic as it deliberately blurs the variety of ethnic distinctions within the larger formation. Such an ethnic marker, for instance, can be seen in the ethnonym “Bulgarian” retained in the folk songs from that period. In sum, while conveniently serving to structure the multicultural space within the Ottoman empire, the Romaic supra-national formation can likewise be read as an imperial imposition on the colonial space that filters the authentic pronouncements of the local voices (if there had been any such then).

The third contribution entitled “The Bulgarian Literary Space and Its Languages: Monolingual Canon, Plural Writings,” illuminates the dark areas of the Bulgarian official monolingual space tracing its prolific polyglossic roots to Ottoman times. The article, authored by Marie Vrinat-Nikolov, strives to rehabilitate the deliberately silenced presence of linguistic plurality within the Bulgarian autonomous political space of the early post-Liberation years. She insightfully dwells on the politically excised cultures and languages of ethnic minorities, such as Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and Turks, to straighten the way and establish the monolingual canon of Bulgarian literary production. Much in line with Benedict Anderson’s theory of the nation as an imagined community, Vrinat-Nikolov’s study explores the misplaced boundaries of the culture of the nation state that leaves its actually existing ethnic components in the invisible beyond.

Chapter four, entitled “Post-Liberation Literary Quests: From National Nostalgia to Social Anger and Modernist Dreams” and authored by Milena Kirova, focuses on the mainstream literary production of the Bulgarian national consciousness. This process took the form of an excessively dynamic development of diverse trends, genres, and modes of writing within a substantially limited temporal period. In the span of just several decades from the early post-Liberation years to the First World War, a number of literary movements developed synchronously, flowing in and out of each other. Here are included early founding epic and more realistic works, such as Ivan Vazov’s *Under the Yoke* and Zahari Stoyanov’s *Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings*, Elin Pelin’s apocalyptic representation of the Bulgarian countryside in his novella *The Gerak Family*, and the almost contemporaneous development of modernist, Romantic, and symbolist schools like the *Misal* (Thought) Circle and its reformed later offspring. As a result, an abundance of genres, styles, and forms of writing shaped the Bulgarian literary world as a space of intensive interaction with European literary acquisitions, the latter represented mostly by canonic works and some already available Bulgarian translations. Kirova renders in a succinct and accurate way that particularly dynamic aspect of creative and critical exchange, the expanded scope and inevitable limits of the post-Liberation nation-building enthusiasm, and the ensuing liminal formations in the Bulgarian literary world that make it possible to see, once again, the adaptive and receptive functions of local literatures and their ability to negotiate the wider literary space in favourable times.

The final contribution to this section, “Does Bulgarian Literature Have a Place within World Literature?,” authored by Amelia Licheva, restates the rhetorical question of whether Bulgarian literature has a place within world literature, and problematizes its implied answers. On a larger theoretical ground, the question raises a number of controversial scenarios: if it has, whether we could certify it, whether, according to the conventional requirements for eligibility, Bulgarian literature possesses the necessary cross-border audiences; whether a sufficient number of its works, written in a “minority” language,

have been translated into some of the languages of global circulation; if it enjoys the needed worldwide recognition on other grounds, as, for instance, authorial achievement in the form of illustrious awards; or whether it can transmit messages that go beyond local concerns. Licheva's account takes up the final criterion and explores its potential for the Bulgarian case under four convenient principles of thematic analysis: *past*, *present*, *mythology*, and *dystopias*. They turn out to be consistent with the contemporary stage of the development of Bulgarian literature and most of her illustrations come from that temporal segment: she discusses works such as Georgi Gospodinov's *The Physics of Sorrow*, the texts of Angel Igov and Alek Popov, Milen Ruskov's novels *Chamkoria* and *Summit*, Zahari Karabashliev's historical novel *Havra*; she also considers the *oeuvre* of Zdravka Evtimova, Maria Stankova, Kristin Dimitrova, Yanitsa Radeva, Vassil Georgiev, and others. Another particularly interesting form of world-conscious writing is exemplified by *exophonic* texts. When it comes to writing in English, the most illustrious contemporary representatives from Bulgaria are Kapka Kassabova and Miroslav Penkov, but as Licheva justly observes, their works tend to exult a more or less pronounced form of self-exoticism. Consequently, she suggests that Bulgarian literature has enough potential to take part in the worldwide literary and cultural trends, but its thematic concerns are somehow tied to a local setting. Whether this represents a setback, however, is not obvious, as, from another critical angle it could be viewed as a way of reclaiming locality from beyond its whereabouts.

The volume's second section is entitled "Geographies: Bulgarian Literature as Un/common Ground Within and Without" and reflects on a number of problematic cases of "placing" local writing as "world" writing, and the other way round, by means of strategic displacements. One of the most pertinent questions in that part is raised by the final contribution authored by the contemporary Bulgarian writer Emiliya Dvoryanova. Her text, structured as a story within a story (both stories are left open-ended), imagines a catalogue-like approach to ordering the immensity of world literature in the protagonist's own bookcase where each shelf is supplied with a more or less impressive number of titles of local, regional, and world writings. At the moment when she becomes overwhelmed by the tediousness of this ordering task, she finds herself troubled by the following thought, "the concepts of 'global' and world do not coincide – on the contrary, there is a tension between them; the 'global' devours the 'world' and picks it clean, while slyly insinuating itself as its 'synonym'" (138). This realization also runs through the uneasy location of Bulgarian literature both within and beyond national borders. Further on in her text, Dvoryanova makes a striking confession: "My village, however, is not merely 'hard to find' – it is perfectly imperceptible and unmarked on the globe ... the globe is no more than a model, an abstraction; there is neither soil, nor grass upon it" (141). The "placeless" place of literature on the global map, then, exists as an interval that reminds us to beware of the grand narratives of "global" importance," "global" literary trends, or "global" aspirations of local literatures, and to adopt models of the world that insist on its plurality, multidirectional development, and formations of local literatures as crossroads of interaction rather than as forms of assimilation.

Following this direction, the volume's second section dwells on some striking cases of aberration from the mainstream literary forms that operate as areas of convergence with world literature. One such example is the short-lived and controversial emergence of Futurism as an ultimate avant-garde strain, with a manifesto and a small circle of adherents headed by Kiril Krastev. The phenomenon is studied in detail in a co-authored chapter by Vassil Vidinsky, Maria Kalinova, and Kamelia Spassova, entitled "Anomaly and Distext in Bulgarian Literature: Kiril Krastev."

This chapter is preceded by two contributions that discuss the ambiguous and often imagined itineraries that the formulation of a national canon may take. Boyko Penchev follows the controversial perceptions of early modern literary self-awareness in Bulgaria, taking the more traditional turn of claiming "placedness" as a major factor in defining the country's "Europeanness," and "mass readership" as a necessary requirement for a "worthy" work; and the elitist, but also imagined itinerary of "autonomous literature" whose aesthetic properties and artistic vision take precedence over social concerns. In turn, Bilyana Kourtasheva studies the curious case of Pencho Slaveykov's imagined anthology *On the Isle of the Blessed*, a work which corresponds structurally to Fernando Pessoa's heteronymous writing. Bringing together nineteen imagined poets from a mythical insular country and presenting them to the local

Bulgarian audience, Slaveykov locates Bulgarian literature on the imagined map of a fictional anthology much before the actual publication of anthologies would gain speed. Kourtasheva's study traces the major stages in the development of the anthology tradition, explores its instrumental role in mapping local trends and regional interactions, but is, above all, anxious to establish the intensity of the literary quest for maturity, even if it could only be dreamed of at that stage of development of Bulgarian literature.

The next chapter, "Telling History in Many Ways: The Recent Past as Literary Plot," authored by Ani Burova, focuses on a number of writings that reconstruct Bulgaria's recent past and studies their methods, strategies, and thematic concerns as local, but also regional responses to shared historical experience. The study inspects the formation of genres, settings, characters, and narrative techniques that tend to rewrite earlier epic models of narrating the past through breaking the epic perspective down to smaller units of more realistic representation. Such individuation of historical experience is also rendered by means of modern and postmodern techniques that display degrees of similarity across the wider space of eastern Europe.

Mihaela Harper's chapter embarks on a much later period. Her study's immediate interest is Miroslav Penkov's cross-border Anglophone narratives that lend a particular shape to the problematic rethinking of the "local" and the "global." So far, the contributions in this second part of the volume have suggested a number of displacements of both the "local" whereabouts of Bulgarian literature and its larger, expanded locations. The most conspicuous example, that of its imagined literary maturity as a "blessed isle" of choicest writings, restates its relative insularity, partly due to linguistic enclosure. Exophony, or the ability to write in a language that is not the writer's first or "native" tongue, certainly helps open the linguistic location of "minor" literatures to "global" routes, but, in this process, another, cultural misplacement is produced. Harper, quoting Derrida's 1993 text *Aporias*, describes this movement by the same term, as loss, due to a passage, and while such a loss may entail disorientation (with all the colonial connotations of the term), in writers like Penkov, it results in a productive collapse of the in-betweenness that characterizes migrant transition and self-location. In other words, exophony not only opens "linguistic gates," but melts thresholds and steers them into a space of transition where what is lost is the traumatic experience of cultural dichotomy. In the Bulgarian case, such a reading of exophony opens ways to consider the concepts of "local" and "global" in their aporic absence, and to break the rather abstract form of "global" into a more articulate multiplicity of worlds.

The third section, entitled "Economies: Bulgarian Literature and the Global Market," is mostly concerned with the "economic" aspect of a local literature's performance on the world literary "market." All contributors to that part are unanimous, with various degrees of (un)certainly, about the fact that the bulk of Bulgarian literary production occupies a meaningful void on the market, with only sporadic moments of some visibility. While this niche has certainly formed as a result of the relatively few translations of seminal Bulgarian works into English and other global languages, the problem of visibility reaches beyond the supposed insularity of "minor" languages and cultures and the problematic handling of marketing strategies of translation. Most of the chapters in this section discuss the parameters of literary mobility in both directions, as a "travelling" experience that helps relocate local expectations and world demands. To begin with, Todor Hristov's analysis of Aleko Konstantinov's travelogue *To Chicago and Back* (1894) and the series of feuilletons making up his satire *Bay Ganyo. Incredible Tales of a Modern Bulgarian* (1895) places Konstantinov's excessive criticism of Bulgarian heuristic self-location in a wide, post-Liberation expanse of misunderstanding. It is this exaggerated, overly enthusiastic and dynamic elaboration of world-mindedness that produces the disproportionate figure of Bay Ganyo's misunderstood Bulgaria and Europe, and the stereotype of negative self-location. However, as Hristov insightfully suggests, this negative stereotype, or "stain," can be transformed into such a vigorous lens of self-identification that it may induce the intensity of invisibility to incorporate not only the Bulgarian, but also the European participants in it. Thus, Bay Ganyo's excessively exaggerated visibility conceals the diversity of relations that might have described the Bulgarian participation in the international fair in Chicago and reduces them to the experience of inadequacy. Such inadequacy, Hristov argues, can also be productive as it spills over a number of binary oppositions. For example, in the second part of the satire, it takes the form of Bay Ganyo's imagined Europeanness that he employs strategically to "dissimulate

his political, economic, and discursive violence” (151) when back in Bulgaria. Hristov further analyses how this self-constructed negative stereotype has grown into a less serious, jocular means of self-ridicule, but its latent vigour continues to return in narratives of contemporary Bulgarian self-location in the world. He concludes that cross-border mobility has taken a particular turn with the genre of travel writing. In the Bulgarian context, it develops as a peculiar form of negotiation between Bulgarian invisibility and its grotesquely exaggerated visible representation in world space. This exaggeration can likewise be approached as an interpretative gesture in a local literary endeavour to misrepresent the world to itself and itself to the world by embracing invisibility and claiming its “otherness” to project the itinerary of its potential progress against it. To a certain extent, this strategy amounts to a form of inward splitting and othering to figure out the possibility of Bulgarian progress and world recognition by facing its regressive, optically distorted and overwhelming mirror reflection. Therefore, Europe and the world operated as a “normative horizon” (Kiossev 159) of Bulgarian post-Liberation literary and cultural self-location, as did the vast imagined community of the nation.

The next contribution, Alexander Kiossev’s illuminating examination of contemporary literary trends, traces the dissolution and disintegration of such normative horizons into individual voices, strategies of writing, and positions in the contemporary writing world. He provides several significant examples of these ongoing processes: “the structure of the publishing industry, the book market, and the literary media” (162). The writing, as well as the publishing space, have lost their hubs of orientation, according to Kiossev. As he points out, what is nearly extinct is the glue that binds individual *fora* into a shared imaginary public scene where authors, styles, and achievements could read, fascinate, compare, juxtapose, and discern one another—thus, in a collective effort of communication, producing what Bourdieu used to call the “nomos,” that is, the field’s law and norm (163). This lack of normative consistence has produced a centrifugal abundance of genres, styles, and poetics that coexist chaotically in multiple niches in popular production and as “elite” literature, ranging from the imitators of global bestseller genres through their local adaptations, through radical, self-sufficient forms, to the limited area of fantastic fiction. The so-called “Bulgarian literature” survives problematically in “this fragmented and centrifugal field,” Kiossev observes, with a dissipation of the previously established centres of literary activity into numerous societies, circles, and editions some of which have gone entirely digital. And the same principle applies to the field of literary criticism. With this context in mind, he turns to the world literary stage and traces the literary openings where some contemporary Bulgarian writers’ works spill over into the world space. Such are the works of Georgi Gospodinov, Alek Popov, Elena Aleksieva, Vladislav Todorov, among others. Their production is largely characterized by the desire to steer away from both the Bulgarian narrative tradition of the past and to revise the global genres creatively, which makes their writing worth considering. Yet, as Kiossev correctly observes, they fail to negotiate between national and international spaces adequately, being rooted mostly in their self-invented styles. In this context of literary disjuncture poetry develops an even greater capacity for alienation and self-effacement. Some contemporary poets, like Nadezhda Radoulova and Boiko Lambovski, experiment with linguistic deconstruction and alienation to the point of linguistic invisibility. Other writers, like Ani Ilkov and Milen Rouskov, reclaim traditional genres, techniques, and motifs only to subvert them, thus spurning any possibility of measuring a degree of continuity with earlier modes. If these tendencies continue undisturbed and amplified, Kiossev even envisages “the inability of local fields to produce their own literary law, to an omnivorous commercial ‘democratization’ and globalization of literary production” (169).

The next chapter, authored by Dimitar Kambourov and entitled “Bulgarians Writing Abroad: Import and (Re)export of the Outsourced Production” meditates on the formation of a possible, alternative canon of exophonic Bulgarian writing. Whether this can actually be possible, however, will have to be confirmed in a discussion on whether exophonic writing should altogether be incorporated as part of a national tradition, even in the form of an alternative trend. Being a hybrid form of writing, its potential opens a specific itinerary of supranational reading. In this sense, Kambourov’s article focuses on the mobility it indulges, mostly as regards the recipient Bulgarian culture which such works can enter only after they have been translated into Bulgarian. Perhaps, the most adequate way to approach them would be to view them as samples of migrant writing since most of the discussed writers have already perma-

nently settled abroad. Indeed, reading them as voices of the extended Bulgarian cultural space is possible but this space will be alternative, homeless, and rather unsheltered, moving in-between the attempts to restore a reconstructed form of an imagined homeplace and its uncertain location.

Kambourov analyses in detail two pairs of such writers and their works, the female “tandem” of Kapka Kassabova’s *Street Without a Name* and Rouja Lazarova’s *Mausoleum*; and a male one, Ilija Trojanow’s *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner* and Dimitré Dinev’s *Angel Tongues*. A major binding principle in each pairing is the specific representation of Bulgaria’s communist past: while the female pair tends to project it as a space of victimhood and limitations, the male “duo” is less concerned with the regime’s crippling effects than with the problematic family worlds that suffer dissolution and fragmentation but turn out to be more permanent than the political regime. While the remembered experiences in these works exhibit different degrees of submissiveness to communist oppression, all writings render the acute distance of their displacement in forms of self-exoticism. Other contemporary writers of Bulgarian descent employ similar modes of representation: Miroslav Penkov’s novel *Stork Mountain* and Kapka Kassabova’s travelogue *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe* provide good illustrations. Partly conceived as a nostalgic reminiscence and as narratives that help justify the writers’ migration, these maps of Bulgaria’s communist past are also driven by commercial reasons: most publishers abroad would expect such writers to produce texts of expanded, deliberately invented visibility of their origins. Thus, the fictional return they undergo is, to some extent, both emotional and commercial, “selling” traumatic memories to a world that demands sensation.

The alternative migrant literary space that Kambourov attempts to map is, of course, much wider and more controversial. A number of writers, like the late Victor Paskov, chose to write in Bulgarian; Vladislav Todorov has made a similar choice. Others, like Sybille Levitscharoff, Elizabeth Kostova, and Georgi Gospodinov, adopt either more violent or more moderate forms of self-exoticism. *The Physics of Sorrow*, Kambourov observes, is perhaps one of the most prominent examples of a work that invites world reading. In it, Gospodinov attempts to “restore” the primordial “blood relations” with all the entities in the world through the narrator’s overwhelming monologue. In Kambourov’s view, “Gospodinov’s monstrously monomaniacal individualism of ultimate self-originating, whose model is the enormous solitude of the Minotaur—a little boy imprisoned in a maze—gives birth to the utmost extended family—that of the world (181).

Interestingly, Kambourov refers to Levi-Strauss’s reading of the Oedipus myth to suggest a common mythic itinerary in such works due to their origin-oriented mythic aspects. But such writings also suggest the solitary, Minotaur-like existence of the Bulgarian literary space whose capacity to invent its multiple ties with world literature may condition worldwide recognition, but not guarantee it.

The following two chapters are also concerned with the more or less problematic openness of Bulgarian literary space to world readings. Revisiting Kapka Kassabova and other migrant writers of Bulgarian descent and writing from the standpoint of her own migrant experience of a scholar who lives in the United States, Yana Hashamova draws a comparative parallel between Kassabova’s fictional reconstruction of a politically configured past and a similar fictional project undertaken by the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić with respect to the former Yugoslavia. Sharing the common experience of self-imposed exile, both writers are striving to reclaim a missing part in their identities. What is interesting here is that even though their fictional (but also sporadic physical) returns to the places of their origins take the form of stereotypical reconstructions, those stereotypes turn out to be important instruments of critical assessment of the cultures of their chosen residence. Quoting Ludmilla Kostova’s illuminating observation from her article “Writing across the Native/Foreign Divide: The Case of Kapka Kassabova’s *Street without a Name*,” Hashamova argues that Kassabova describes the “destructive effects of western affluence” (194) and “western Europe’s recent regressions to populist and separatist nationalisms” (194), for instance.

Coming next and last in this section of the volume, Angela Rodel, a professional literary translator living and working in Bulgaria, writes about the challenges of translating from a “minor” language for the world literary market that demands both quality and sellable readings. Such a translator, she confesses from personal experience, must be a multifaceted and devoted professional, a “fakir,” almost fa-

natically dedicated to anything but a lucrative job, a veritable shape shifter, who can be a “scout,” “grant writer,” “editor,” “collaborator/consultant,” “agent,” “marketer,” and “cultural ambassador” at the same time. The ideal translators from “minor” languages are, therefore, expected to be a version of the mythological *Hecatoncheires*, or Hundred-Handers, but only in that way they would be sufficiently equipped to enter the world literary market and earn recognition for a less visible and less demanded “minor” literature. For Rodel, this opening came with the translation of Georgi Gospodinov’s *The Physics of Sorrow*, which won the 2016 AATSEEL Prize for Literary Translation and was shortlisted for ALTA’s 2016 National Translation Award and the 2016 PEN Translation Prize.

The final part of this seminal collection, “Genetics: Bulgarian Literature’s Heredities, Affinities, and Prospects,” tracks down genealogies, explores literary “genomes” and “epigenomes,” generations, family trees and “zonal areas” of regional lineages, as well as the hereditary “sorrow” and “emptiness” of local immobility that, once inhabited and embraced, becomes a “place” from where the Bulgarian writer can write both about his/her origins and the world. In this part we can discern several critical models of reading local “rootedness” and its possible “routes” in the dynamic space of world literature.

In the first contribution, Darin Tenev introduces a peculiar interdisciplinary scheme of organization that negotiates between literary history and genetics. Such a symbiosis is not arbitrary and practically makes it possible to consider literature as a living body whose hereditary features and functions (forms, techniques, themes, or genres) constitute its literary “genome” while dynamic extratextual processes such as “context, culture, society, politics, religion, science” (214) can modify its expression. While the genome is stable and latent, that is, all features inherited through historical continuity are there, some of them can be “switched on” and others, suppressed under specific cultural, political, social, and economic circumstances. Borrowing from the vocabulary of epigenetics, the study of how “external factors not only influence but also control and guide” (214) the expression of genes, Tenev suggests that world literary processes can be viewed as epigenetic stimuli, that is, they may activate certain genres, thematic concerns, or strategies of writing on a local level, while suppressing others. In this way, even when encoded through hereditary traditions, local literatures are not completely immobilized as they are constantly open to epigenetic modification in the wider literary space. To demonstrate how this theoretical model works, Tenev analyses the revised ending of Pencho Slaveykov’s poem “Michelangelo” as a reaction to another poem, Vazov’s “The Statue of Moses,” in a wider international philosophical context. Though this analytical model appears to be fully functional, it raises certain questions about the hierarchy of the described processes. While conveniently adapted to literary history, this form of interdisciplinary organization fails to explain the ways in which local literatures can, in turn, affect and modify wider literary spaces. If the world “epigenome” contains and controls the local expression of genomes, then the latter would not be able to spill over their prescribed reactions, and local literatures would, again, be immobilized by their automatic inclusion in a world literary system of control and regulation.

The next two contributions, Julia Kristeva’s commemoration of Blaga Dimitrova and Miglena Nikolchina’s study of Bulgarian women’s literature, particularly focused on the life and writing of Elisaveta Bargyana and Dora Gabe, explore the role of literary femininity in relation to heredity. Borrowing from the repertoire of gender studies and drawing on Kristeva’s own perspicacious analysis included in the same volume, Nikolchina traces the development of women’s literature, and more specifically, poetry, in Bulgaria through several routes, plotlines, or generations, as she puts it. Both Kristeva and Nikolchina mystify their accounts, by poetic empathy (Kristeva) and narrative zest (Nikolchina), but only to reveal the impossibility to follow a definite plotline in the “warped” history of women’s writing. One of the specific characteristics of this tangled space is its asynchronicity, the fact that several generations of writers occur simultaneously and on a par with each other. Thus, continuity is not transmitted diachronically, but exists synchronically, and operates through parallel relationships. The question of where the beginning is (if a beginning could indeed be postulated in this interflow!) becomes irrelevant. What is pertinent is not so much who came first but rather, who provided the literary landscape with the mythological figure of a female progenitor who could “mother” the procreative energies of Bulgarian women’s writing. In her insightful article, Nikolchina identifies four such semi-mythological generations, that, to use Dinev’s idiom, may represent a world literary genome activated at a local level – the just mentioned,



“first” generation of “mythic femininity ... of homoerotic identification with the mother” (230), the generation of “tomboys. They write through masculine identifications, and femininity is experienced in an ego-dystonic and dramatic way” (230), that of heroically stoic women who leave time to administer justice; and a fourth, more active and inquisitive generation. Nikolchina then locates Bagryana and her *sui generis* self-representation as a “descendant of her own blood” (233) in the first plotline, while Gabe, with her poetry of loss and minimalism, is assigned a place in the third line, where another poet, Ekaterina Yosifova, can also be located. With Dimitrova, the maternal/feminine hereditary line forms a strange loop and veers towards a masculine itinerary. Both Kristeva and Nikolchina mark out the exceptional openness of Dimitrova’s self-location. Kristeva, for instance, notes the repetitive presence of words that denote flowing fluid, “water, light, cool breeze, and lost steps” (224) in Dimitrova’s poems, and Nikolchina dwells on her “masculine” femininity, her self-representation as a female Prometheus, a “Promethea” (231). Dimitrova’s biography is likewise marked by her political role as the first Bulgarian woman to have been elected Vice President of post-communist Bulgaria. In sum, Nikolchina’s strategy of deliberate mythification, though relying on generalizations, helps structure the specifics of asynchronicity in the history of Bulgarian women’s writing and enables its reading from beyond local specificity.

While most of the critical writings and the literary examples discussed so far have focused on the productive energies of Bulgarian literature that are either employed to counteract its underrepresentation in world literary space or to compensate for it, Georgi Gospodinov moves in just the opposite direction in his contribution to the volume. In the epigraph to his contribution, entitled “Writing from the Saddest Place in the World” and correlative to his seminal creative work *The Physics of Sorrow*, he voices his doubts about the existence of “a geography of happiness” (239) and a little further on, observes, ironically paraphrasing Tolstoy’s famous statement about happy families, that “[h]appy literatures are all alike; every unhappy literature is unhappy in its own way” (239). What he suggests is that while happiness is translatable, negotiable and capable of spilling over the limits of difference, sorrow is idiosyncratic, suppressed, and often deliberately silenced and doomed to oblivion. In the Bulgarian case, sorrow is “made” not that much out of losses, but of missing events, stories, opportunities, worlds; and these absences have been historically encoded, mostly in the time of communism. For Gospodinov, this time is, above all, equivalent to uneventfulness and invisibility to the world. The reality of sorrow opens the space of Elsewhere, which Gospodinov terms “the world withheld” (243), but it is precisely our inability to inhabit that world that he is interested in:

What I am trying to create through my novels and stories is a possibility for us to tell our personal and Bulgarian sorrow and suffering as a part of the European sadness, as a part of the sadnesses of the world. How might I narrate my private sorrow (call it Bulgarian or Eastern European) and, through it, the sorrows of Europe? That is what I am interested in. (246)

The two chapters in this section that discuss *The Physics of Sorrow*, authored by Jean-Luc Nancy and by Cory Stockwell, are both explicit that this digressive strategy is actually working against itself, for being in and writing from the midst of uneventfulness is itself an event, a vigorous browsing through insignificant daily happenings that inspires the creative energy of becoming.

The concluding “Afterword,” authored by Galin Tihanov, himself a migrant by choice, is a brilliant essay on the dynamic, historical, and cultural dislocations that have produced the concept of “world literature,” and the ambiguously convenient modes of thinking through “minor” and “major” forms. He follows through time the swirling dissolution and restoration of their boundaries and the meaningful “beyond” which consists in the numerous asymmetric and asynchronic interactions between literary flows in the global dynamics of literary histories. It is exactly those asymmetries that produce what Tihanov terms “literary zones,” which are defined by “heterogeneity, not by homogeneity: [they are] made up of languages that belong to different language families, and [are] underwritten by the intersection of different religions and ethnicities” (263). As most of the static labels are nowadays flushed into the conglomerate of “marginocentricity” and the reality of “quality literature” is no longer a criterion in the admission of local literatures to worldwide prominence, literary circulation becomes a function of the

global market. This imperative leads us to think about contemporary world literature no longer as a “list of masterpieces” but as “a gallery of mirrors in which we are supposed to catch a glimpse of somebody else’s cultural environment” (Tihanov 264). Unfortunately, being at the mercy of the market is the current constant that Bulgarian literature faces from its “minor” location. Despite this somewhat pessimistic conclusion, I am convinced that this volume of thought-provoking essays will be of great help in making Bulgaria’s literary location more visible.

#### **Works Cited**

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