Do “Minor Literatures” Still Exist?

Galin Tihanov
Department of Comparative Literature, University of London
20 Claremont Grove, Woodford Green, Essex IG8 7HS, U. K.
Email: g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk

Abstract My paper addresses both Bulgarian (more widely, East-European) literature (especially in the first two parts) and developments that bear on the larger framework in which literary history operates today. I revisit the notion of “minor literatures” and show it to be an historical construct with a specific lifespan. I also examine the ambiguity of the project of “minor literatures,” poised as it has lately been between an understanding of “minor” as a potential social and political energy that originates in the writing of a minority within a dominant majority (“minoritäre Literatur”), and an evaluative notion that sees “minor literatures” as small (“kleine Literatur”), derivative, deprived of originality when measured by the yardstick of “mainstream literatures.” The first of these two perspectives is sustained in Deleuze and Guattari’s classic book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*; the second one has a longer pedigree that goes back to the intricate history of Eurocentrism since the 18th century.
Key words “minor literature”; world literature; Balkan literatures; literary canon; Eurocentrism; centre and periphery
Author Galin Tihanov is the George Steiner Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen Mary, University of London. He was previously Professor of Comparative Literature and Intellectual History and founding co-director of the Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures at the University of Manchester. His most recent research has been on cosmopolitanism, exile, and transnationalism. His publications include four books and nine (co)edited volumes. Tihanov is winner, with Evgeny Dobrenko, of the Efim Etkind Prize for Best Book on Russian Culture (2012), awarded for their co-edited *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011). He is Honorary President of the ICLA Committee on Literary Theory and elected member of Academia Europaea; he is also member of the Advisory Board of the Institute for World Literature (IWL) at Harvard. In 2012, he delivered the Mihály

Babits Lectures. Tihanov held visiting professorships at Yale University (2007), St. Gallen University (2012), University of Sao Paulo (2013), and Peking University (2014).

My paper addresses both Bulgarian (more widely, East-European) literature (especially in the first two parts) and developments that bear on the larger framework in which literary history operates today. I demonstrate the dependence of the idea of "minor literatures" on the broader dynamics of literary history, offering sufficient proof that the very concept of "minor literatures" is an historical construct with a specific (limited) life-span. What are the implications the reconsideration of the notion of "minor literatures" might in turn have for the changing conceptual apparatus of literary history is a question I should like to put on the agenda in another essay; here I address this issue only in a very provisional and rather inchoate manner.

I revisit the notion of "minor literatures" by examining the ambiguity of the project, poised as it has lately been between an understanding of "minor" as a potential for social and political energy that originates in the writing of a minority within a dominant majority ("minoritäre Literatur"), and an evaluative notion that sees "minor literatures" as small ("kleine Literatur"), derivative, deprived of originality when measured by the yardstick of "mainstream literatures." The first of these two perspectives is sustained in Deleuze and Guatarri's classic book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* and amplified and radicalized in their later *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Deleuze and Guattari make it abundantly clear that the major and minor modes are two different treatments of the (same) language of the majority (e.g. German in Germany, Hungarian in Hungary). One of these treatments "consists in extracting constants from it, the other in placing it in continuous variation"; in other words, the "minor" is the force that questions and varies the major from within.[1] The second perspective — "minor" as "small" and "derivative" — has a longer pedigree that goes back to the intricate history of Eurocentrism since the 18th century.

1

Bulgarian literature does not seem to be particularly amenable to a study grounded in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of deterritorialisation of language as the hallmark of a "minor literature" produced at the margins of an established language. Deleuze and Guattari assume a linguistic framework that presupposes already institutionally stable national languages, and thus also a provisional canon to which a "minor"

writer relates his or her own writing. This approach, however, would end up bracketing out the arguably most interesting century of Bulgarian literary culture, the time from the 1760s to the 1860s when the literature of the so called “national revival” displayed the linguistically unregulated existence of a body of writing in becoming, without a firm canon and without prescriptive expectations of regularity and beauty. If anything, this is the time when it is still possible for writers to create works in other languages, which are then nonetheless adopted as part of the Bulgarian literary corpus: Liuben Karavelov and Grigor Purlichev spring to mind.

On the other hand, a Deleuzian approach *strictu senso* might nonetheless be applied in earnest to Bulgarian literature — but not just yet, it would seem on first glance. We simply lack the knowledge base that would allow us to do so. We know virtually nothing about writing in Bulgarian in traditional Bulgarian communities abroad, where Bulgarian is more than the language of isolated émigré intellectuals; nor do we know enough about the interaction of Bulgarian writers with the oral poetry tradition of the Ottoman Empire.

Yet if we heed Deleuze’s call that, as suggested above, “minor literatures” should be possible even where ethnic difference is not necessarily at stake, so long as language follows, in his words, the “lines of flight” made available by a deliberate strategy of self-exclusion on the writer’s part, then we would indeed be able to see Bulgarian literature, especially that of the two or three decades, in a different light. Two poems by Ani Ilkov, arguably the most powerful and sophisticated voice in Bulgarian poetry since the late 1980s, could furnish evidence for this process of intentional minoritisation of the major. Ilkov performs a gesture of voluntary exile from translatability by mobilizing archaic layers of Bulgarian right at the heart of his poetic language:

By what вершаеш сине мой By what резон св
ершаеши Сега надолу
слиза кой Вдън
мъртвите блуждаеши …[2]

Or even more inventively, with a deliberate (and pseudo-macaronic) mixture of Cartesian Latin, English, and a pervasive host of obsolete forms imitating (as they also do in the lines above) the language of Bulgarian literature from the middle of the 19th century:

Играещиц в сияен зар Подобно

маларметo Но лъсна голият му гъз
Под форма на дупе-то
……………………….
Ми летоска cogito дъж Расте което
пръска Дали и он така надлъж
Показва че присъства Поради что? By
what premise? & how it really happened?[3]

Remarkably, and not unexpectedly, this subversively ironic linguistic audacity was taking place in the context, and in a sense as a supplement to, Ilkov's heightened social and political activism during the early and mid-1990s. Although this moment of his career as a poet and public intellectual merits a much more detailed consideration, I here wish to spell out only that which seems to me to be the most essential feature of this activism: Ilkov was perhaps the most talented representative of that brand of ferocious Eastern European anticommunism that was in favour of democracy and a multiparty system but, as turned out in time, against the rule of the market. The bifocal vision of these intellectuals was bound to perceive, in Bulgaria but also elsewhere, the rise of the market and its domination over public life as a vulgar byproduct — rather than a logical consequence — of the political transition they had otherwise welcomed and supported.

2

But let me now move to the other, better established and still widely resonant meaning of "minor literature" — that of "small, derivative, deprived of originality, benighted, lagging behind," a literature that is worth reading only in order to corroborate or amplify already available superior examples of European civilization. The roots of this evaluative paradigm lie back in the Enlightenment philosophy of history. At the same time as the French *philosophes* discovered progress as the supposedly uncontested trajectory of humanity, they also discovered that different communities will arrive at that implied pinnacle of history at different times. Apparently the direction was only one, but the circumstances and the speed were calling for a more pluralistic picture. The very concept of civilization was invented as a tool of locating the provisional point occupied by all these different communities on the axis of progress. It is far from accidental that the Bulgarians made their first prominent appearance on the large stage of world literature precisely in the book of a French Enlightenment *philosophe*, in Voltaire's *Candide* (but then, again, only as a substitute designation of the Prussians); all this took

place in 1759,[4] three years before Paissii of Khilendar professed his pride of belonging to the glorious tribe of the Bulgarians.

The anthropological curiosity that flourished during the Enlightenment was lifting entire ethnic communities from the obscurity of mere exoticism to that of benign cultural insignificance within the emerging framework of shared European values. If we trace the history of the entrance of Bulgarian culture into Europe, we notice that it begins with the translation of folklore. This is true of the Slavonic languages (the earliest example being an 1823 translation of a Bulgarian folksong into Czech), as well as of translations into English, French, and German.[5] Folklore, however, is all about an *a*synchronic adoption, where cultural forms long gone are domesticated once again as a manifestation of anonymous (and thus already softened) exoticism; folklore reveals a previous archaic stage of cultural evolution that cannot be sustained, or indeed, recommended any longer in the West. Most of the time it remains an alien body in the discursive tissue of Western culture and serves as an awkward reminder — despite Herder’s and his Romantic followers’ noble ideas — that the universal powers of humans to create fictional worlds had not always been employed in the most sophisticated fashion.

The true history of “minor literatures,” in the sense of small and poor relatives of the mainstream European literatures commences only with the end of the “exotic phase” and the arrival of the more or less synchronized literary movements of the fin-du-siècle and later the avant-garde, the many *isms* (Symbolism being one of the most recognizable such phenomena) which begin to coordinate the map of literary Europe and entangle the smaller literatures of the Balkans (and of East-Central Europe) into a larger landscape of shared conventions and styles. Teodor Trayanov, Nikolai Liliev, and a whole string of other Bulgarian modernists, just as Khristo Smirnenski, Geo Milev, Chavdar Mutafov, and other representatives of the Bulgarian post-symbolism and avant-garde, are — from this somewhat narrower but epistemologically more rigorous perspective — the only conceivable exponents of “minor literature” Bulgarian culture had furnished before 1945. In a similar position, one could venture, were also dozens of writers after 1945, who were participants in the national version of a concomitant socialist-realist literature produced in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. In this regard (as in many others), socialist realism was only an extension of modernity and of its various coordinated *isms* which bound together the literary space of Europe (and the world beyond) through their mandatory conventions and through an experience of typological proximity even where the experience of simultaneity was not immediately available.

With the demise of the *isms* — these smaller contributory narratives that made up the great European narrative of literary succession and progression — the very foundation of the axiological juxtaposition between minor and major has become much more problematic. We live in a time when the only possible distinction that could still render such a juxtaposition meaningful is the distinction based on the mode of existence and functioning of language: the great languages that have spread across continents, nurturing their own diasporic writing, and the small, or 'minor' languages, whose literatures have largely remained trapped in the physical body of the respective nation state, or have — at best — inhabited, sometimes even legitimized, its (often hotly) disputed territorial extensions (e.g. Hungarian in Transylvania and Slovakia).

"Minor literatures" is thus a construct of literary history that experiences today significant difficulties conditioned by changes in the way we understand and write literary and cultural history. The first and most consequential among these is the arrival and consolidation of transnationalism, an epistemic paradigm that has always professed a value-neutral approach to the phenomena it seeks to analyse, thus relaxing palpably, indeed almost altogether dispensing with, the division between "minor" and "major" cultures and literatures. Transnationalism, in the modern and currently well established sense of the term, was first employed as a theoretical paradigm in the early 1970s, by political scientists who sought to understand the impact on American foreign policy of a new and previously under-conceptualised interaction between political agents who were not identical with the nation-states: various NGOs, international interest and pressure groups, etc. Later on, transnationalism drew on a twofold discontent: with the undifferentiated, blanket concept of globalisation and with what social scientists termed in the 1990s "methodological nationalism". Although it was only in the 1990s that recognition of the importance of transnationalism became prominent in the social sciences, gradually making its way into the humanities as well, the impulses for a conceptualisation of literature beyond, above, or below the level of the nation state are historically much older. Before I proceed to examine the current situation of strong relativisation of the value-charged opposition between "minor" and "major" literatures and the factors that shape it, let me offer a brief historical excursus into the ambivalent self-positioning of the field of Slavic literary studies in the long process of methodological re-scaling beyond the constraints of the national. "Methodological nationalism" is not, of course, a panacea; it comes with its own limitations;[6] but it is a powerful and much-needed antidote to the increasingly embarrassing — yet still vociferous — mantras of national literary historiography.

Slavic Philology, the disowned older relative of today's "Russian and East European Studies," seemed well-placed some two centuries ago, at the time of its first steps, to contribute to this celebration of cultural production beyond borders. Most of the literatures it wanted to explore were after all the literatures of societies without their own nation states. What is more, they were produced in the context of bi- or multi-lingual empires, an environment that today attracts the attention of anthropologists and sociologists embracing the transnational research paradigm. Yet Slavic Philology, like most other European branches of philology (but in the end for longer than most), followed a different course; it became a voluntary instrument of national revivals and rivalries, often working with entities and labels larger than the nation, only to reaffirm and enhance its — the nation's — priority. The idea of Slavdom, for example, was employed by many of the Russian Slavophiles and *pochvenniki* as an imperial weapon of hegemony, or, in its Polish version, as a justification and embodiment of messianic dreams. Ironically, the first outlines of the idea of Slavdom were actually written in non-Slavic languages: the Dominican monk Vinko Priboevich published in Venice in 1532 his *De origine successibusque Slavorum*, followed by Mauro Urbini's *Il regno de gli Slavi* (1601), a key-text for the first Bulgarian history written in 1762, which signaled the onset of Bulgarian nationalism.

The dynamics of this process is more complex than a brief survey could suggest. Towards the end of the 19th century, with the Slavic nation-states in the Balkans feeling more confident after successful completion of their long struggles for independence and unification, the paradigm of kinship and superiority fuelled by the notion of a Christian Slavdom began to compete with regional optics allowing for cultural and religious variety, and even conflict. A good example of this new perspective, insisting on diversity, was the growth of Balkan Studies. If Viktor Zhirmunskii is correct, Balkan Studies ("balkanistika," "Balkanistik") made its entrance as a discipline only in the late 1890s (more precisely, 1896-1898, in Vols. 13 and 15 of *Sbornik za narodni umotvoreniia, nauka i knizhnina*, where Ivan Shishmanov's well-known study on *The Song about the Dead Brother in the Poetry of the Balkan Peoples* was published).[7] An adherent of the migration school in the study of Folklore, Shishmanov believed in a freely floating body of motifs that recognised no state borders. Although he never posed the crucial question of subjectivity and agency — in the primeval anonymity of folklore, the rupture, asymmetry, and estrangement accompanying the act of border-crossing was not an issue — Shishmanov and the many scholars who followed in his steps refused to assert the (by then customary) axiological distinction between "small" and "great

literatures." Not by accident were these scholars more interested in folklore than in literature *per se*, understood in the modern sense produced and implied by the evaluative discriminations already in place by the late 19th century.

But this healthy preoccupation did not last. Local differences of intensity and pace aside, after World War One and throughout the Soviet age, to some extent even during the transition to the free market (in this respect, political caesurae did not necessarily amount to paradigmatic shifts) writing literary history under the umbrella of the nation state — even when this was done within the larger domain of a communist commonwealth — became once again, in Bulgaria and in most other Eastern European countries, a safe recipe for projecting one's own literature as suspiciously unique — which, in fact, was little else than the other side of "minor," "derivative," "obscure," "small." Claiming a stake in European culture meant claiming a well-guarded corner, a little patch of exclusive, unmatched and unmatchable literary experience. The dislodgment of "minor" literature as an evaluative paradigm could thus not occur before the gradual downfall of literary history as a discourse sponsored by the nation state.

3

The receding significance of the nation state and the ensuing relativisation of the distinction between "small" and "large" literatures are today driven by modifications of the wider framework in which the practice of literary history takes place. Understanding these modifications seems to me an essential first step. In addition to the nation state (on which I dwell at more considerable length), below I concentrate on two more factors (the media and the evolution of society and of the idea and institutions of university education under the pressure of demographic changes), and seek to elucidate and weigh their importance for the gradual waning of the axiological matrix anchored in the opposition of "minor" and "major."[8]

The Nation State

The origins of literary history as an institutionalized discourse are closely interwoven with the fortunes of nationalism and the nation state after the French Revolution. Although the first chairs of literature were conceived to teach and profess the letters without particular national restrictions, the post-Napoleonic period marked by the rise of nationalism in Europe saw a gradual transition towards a nationally focused research and teaching agenda. Literature itself was seen as an instrument of preserving and glorifying "those great national memories that are in the dim past of a national history" (Schlegel 15) — and so was literary history. As Cornis-Pope and Neubauer have recently argued,[9] the study of literature and its

history was first institutionalized in societies that were concerned to cultivate a clear national identity and gain state sovereignty (Germany, Italy, Central and Eastern Europe) — although it would be true to say that in England, where statehood and national identity had been established very early on, literary historiography took off ahead of any such attempts in the countries mentioned above (Thomas Warton published between 1774 and 1781 three volumes of his unfinished literary history, only making it to the time of the Reformation).[10] In Germany, the first literary history appeared long before the unification of the country under Bismarck in 1871: between 1835 and 1842, Georg Gervinus published a five-volume *Geschichte der poetischen Nationalliteratur der Deutschen* (the title was later changed to *Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung*); this was half a century earlier than the first great history of French literature by Gustave Lanson which appeared in 1895. In Italy, De Sanctis published a two-volume history of Italian literature in 1870-71, after the unification of the country, but still twenty years ahead of Lanson. Even though Gervinus did not agree with the politics by which Bismarck sought to achieve the unification of Germany, his history was a powerful instrument in constructing an awareness of German cultural homogeneity.

The future of this pattern that has enjoyed unquestioned domination for over a century is now highly uncertain. There are several reasons for this. To start with, Eurocentrism itself has been losing ground ever since World War I, and with it also the European model of nation-centred literary history. This process was exacerbated by the arrival of globalisation on the crest of revolutionary discoveries in information technology in the 1950s, which coincided with the swift dismantling of the colonial system. The ensuing growth of diasporic cultures, on the one hand, and the process of European integration in the context of a globalised economy, on the other, gave rise to occurrences best described as the gradual “hollowing-out” of the nation state in the West. A single unified canon, on which to base literary history, became increasingly untenable. Within the nation-state, there emerged a string of parallel canons called upon to rectify the social injustices of the past. For those willing to see it, there is at present a very strong signal heralding the move away from national (literary) histories: the talk now, especially in Germany, where Goethe had dreamt of a “world literature,” is of how to construct a representative European canon, which would stimulate and draw on the writing of regional histories or, ideally, of a history of European literature at large. A joint French-German history textbook, written with the intention of being used in schools in both countries was introduced to the public in 2007. Nor is this pastime of the rich alone. Concerned with security and determined to see an ever-

expanding market, the European Union and various NGOs compete in the Balkans in sponsoring textbooks that are meant to teach the younger generations that they all have a shared political and cultural history.[11] Thus we face two developments, none of which is hospitable to the traditional literary history commissioned by the nation state (itself further enfeebled today by the drive to surrender ever more power to enable Brussels to fire-fight the raging crisis of sovereign debt): either regional, and even "pan-European" histories, serving a different set of political goals from those so familiar from the recent past, or transnational, often also transcontinental, narratives heeding not the monolithic projects of the nation state but rather, as Stephen Greenblatt demands, the postcolonial processes of "exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unexpected consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for — Greenblatt continues — it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of languages, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy.[12] Needless to say, Greenblatt's message also carries the connotation of skepticism toward, and critique of, the power aspects of conquest, mobility, and the hybrid proliferation of national languages. But it asserts in no uncertain terms the superior viability of cultural production based on such developments: moving beyond the straightjacket of the nation-state, freeing up the potential of language to change as it wanders across continents and social strata, letting language coin its own forms of existence in exile, transition, and miscegenation.[13]

As traditional national literary history takes pains to remain in business, it seeks to accommodate these new developments. A fresh example provides the new Oxford English Literary History in 13 volumes, which will dedicate two volumes to the post-World War II period, both designed to compete with, and qualify, each other in the way they interpret Englishness: the volume *1960-2000: The Last of England*, written by Randall Stevenson, described as a "Scotsman who believes that the idea of 'English literature' is no longer a possibility," and another volume, *1948-2000: The Internationalisation of English Literature*, written by the Canadian Bruce King who celebrates multiculturalism not as the end but as a revival of this idea[14] (Note also that these two volumes interpret differently the lower chronological boundary of the period they explore.) The new Oxford history is thus seeking to transpose — without canceling — the largely exhausted national narrative into the tonality of multicultural globalism.

With reference to Eastern Europe, it is only during the last twenty years that we came to witness the manifestations (still sometimes ruptured, as I noted earlier, by a resilient mentality of uniqueness and exclusivity) of a momentous

methodological superimposition, leading away from the postulates of a language-centred “methodological nationalism”: Slavic Philology began to share territory and prestige with “Russian and East European Studies,” the latter being essentially an area studies paradigm determined to reduce the specific weight of language variety — and thus of literature as well — in the way the cultural production of the post-Soviet era is studied and taught. Thus, historically, looking at Bulgarian literature in particular, we can identify the succession (at times also the overlap) of three particular optics: the Slavic (“slavistika”/“slavianska filologiia;” “Slavistik”/“Slavische Philologie;” “Slavonic Studies”/ “Slavic Philology”), the Balkan (“balkanistika”/”balkanski filologii;” “Balkanologie;” “Balkan Studies”), and the East-European, or post-communist, paradigm (“Russian and East European Studies”/ “South-East European Studies”). As one can readily see, the philological element is on the wane; while the first, partly also the second, link of the chain accommodate the philological component as fully expressive of the whole, the third one no longer does. The trend observed in this succession is that of an ever more overt political interest that attends to the literary aspects of literature only to the extent to which they are representative of larger patterns of social and political evolution. Evaluative judgments are more often than not demobilsed and suspended in the process.

The Media

Marshall McLuhan’s assertion according to which the medium is the message (23-36) regains resonance today as we try to chart the fortunes of literary history and the impact on the previously entrenched but currently ever more shaky distinction between “minor” and “major” literatures.

The business of literary history has changed dramatically over the last 60 years in large measure due to the changing media of its appropriation. There are several aspects to this change. First of all, the pattern of the consumption of literature underwent a significant alteration. Film adaptations of the national canons abound, making it easy to delude oneself that watching *Sense and Sensibility* exempts one from reading Jane Austin. The accessibility of the classics through low-budget television versions gradually came to bridge the gap between high and popular literature that the discipline of literary history has depended on all along. To be sure, it was literary history in the first place that instituted the division between “high” and “low,” and conjured works initially serialized in newspapers for the entertainment (also for the edification, needless to say) of the wider reading public into masterpieces of high culture. Many of the 19th century novels, including those of Dostoevsky and Balzac, among others, were subject to such metamorphic

refashioning at the hands of academic literary historians in the decades following their first publication. Now the table has been turned on the literary historian: the plethora of films, radio adaptations, comics etc. has plunged the profession into a world where the previous security furnished by the canon has all but vanished. The supposedly unique act of the silent reading has been brutally ousted by the mass consumption of visual surrogates perceived to be better at emphasizing the plot and the costumes rather than the supposedly great philosophical message of the literary work of art. Thus literary historians have been left wandering without a compass in the thicket of a culture that is neither high nor low but subsists instead on the reproducibility of the sacred in a myriad of everyday instances of overlapping performance, profanation, and epiphany.

The second aspect is induced by the all-too-powerful presence of the new electronic media. Ever since Baudrillard,[15] we have learned to question the boundary between fact and fiction in the workings of the electronic press. Not only has literature ceased to be, in Hillis Miller's nostalgic words, the sole purveyor of virtual reality;[16] moreover, modern media, in particular the interactive technologies, have brought about an unprecedented openness of the text to simultaneous modification by the recipient. Thus the status of the text has changed beyond the comfortable manageability on which traditional literary history rests. The disobedient text that emerges in the process of the electronic interaction is open-ended, mobile as never before, and truly boundless; not even the conceptual armament of intertextuality is any longer capable of domesticating it. An ever-fluid hypertext renders the customary articulation of semantic entities obsolete and unreliable. The result is an archive of semantically dynamic deposits, which can be added to or subtracted from at liberty at any time. The author/reader boundary is totally erased, and so are the foundations of reception theory and the traditional literary history with its rigid value distinctions.

Finally, the global network creates a vast electronic library, where national traditions and loyalties are quickly destabilized. Fragmentary in its foundations, the experience of the internet-driven reader contributes to a new paradigm of interpretation where reference and comparison no longer originate with compelling logic from a historically verifiable pool of national writing. To make sense of a story or a poem, both teachers and students of literature now often depend on support from the global bank of plots and images that feeds the mind without asking questions about the historical or national appropriateness of the material supplied. The electronic media and the Internet thus confront literary history with the challenges of simultaneity and deracination; they usher in a new age of a

global market of fragmented and repackaged cultural products that no longer come labeled as “minor” or “major,” “great” or “inferior.” In this market, the nation-state increasingly loses its power of canon-formation; moreover, the power of educating and molding its own citizens in a fashion and through means that are controlled by the nation-state also slips away.

Demographics

Habermas, among others, has recently asked the incommodious (to put it mildly) question of “the future of human nature.”[17] He placed this question in the bedrock of modern genetics and the inevitable — and as yet unforeseeable — changes that are to follow from the arrival of cloning and the genetic modification of human material. From my standpoint, there are two interconnected issues at stake here: longevity and memory. Both plunge the commentator into previously unexplored depths. With an ever growing life expectancy and the corresponding attempts at managing it through various economic and administrative techniques, how is memory to be distributed socially? In the wake of the alterations dormant in the management of longevity, how will the perception change of what constitutes the formative experiences and segments of human life: childhood and adolescence? Three of the essential cornerstones of literary history — indeed of any history — will be heading for dramatic transformation. One is the concept of generation; the other one is the notion of period; and the last one — the notion of novelness (what constitutes novelty in the literary and ideological life of society), and thus also the notion of value. Traditional literary history has been reliant on these concepts to provide a meaningful centre of interpretation. It will not be enough to realize that periods in literary and intellectual history are discursive ideological constructs; so much is known even now. The real issue at stake is the changing lifespan of generations, and with this the changing rhythms of the production of meaning. Public consent over key events underlying the narrative of the historian is likely to be reached in an ever more complicated and mediated fashion, because the constitutive voices of the generational ensemble will each have a temporality, duration, and therefore force, different from those informing the practice of (literary) historiography at present. Whether microhistory or any other tools favoured by modern historiography will be able to respond to these challenges is far from certain. I do not wish to sound as the purveyor of mythology: it is the realities of progress in genetics and the impending growth in longevity on a previously unprecedented scale that urge us to rethink the foundations of (literary) history in the future.

It is apposite here — and of a more immediate relevance for our study of the

fading opposition between "large" and "small," "major" and "minor" literatures — to stress that literary history has always been largely sustained by the generally secure, at least in Europe, market of university and school education; without this market, it is difficult to assume that literary history would be a viable enterprise today. But what we see in recent years, precisely as part of the economic and social techniques of demographic control, is the introduction of a totally new concept of education. The so-called "continuing education," or "life-long education," which is now part of the educational landscape throughout Europe and America, slowly but securely redefines the philosophy of education, leaving behind the dogma of clear-cut disciplinarity. The pick-and-mix approach of the Western-style educational supermarket is there to stay and to be employed in regular sequences throughout the life of the individual. Having to serve this ever growing market, as well as the modular system of undergraduate education, is already impacting on the scope of research undertaken in the modern university. Thus we are witnessing a new cycle of education and employment, which no longer separates the two, and a new social task for education to live up to. All this contributes to a new climate of learning and scholarship, in which authoritative knowledge and the guarding cult for particular subjects and their inherent hierarchies of values and quality look increasingly inadequate.[18]

4

Let me recapitulate my argument so far. The origins of literary history as an institutionalized discourse are closely interwoven with the fortunes of nationalism and the nation state after the French Revolution. However, Eurocentrism itself has been losing ground since World War I, and with it also the European model of nation-centred literary history. As the global economy undergoes today a painful readjustment and, more importantly, a slow but seemingly unstoppable rebalancing towards the new power-houses of growth in the Far East, on the Indian Sub-Continent, and in Latin America, the very idea of a binding Euro-North American literary canon, within which established notions of centre and periphery remain meaningful, grows weaker and less tenable. Today we witness a transition to either regional, and even "pan-European," histories, serving a different set of political goals from those so familiar from the recent past, or transnational narratives heeding not the monolithic projects of the nation state, of which earlier literary histories across Europe were representative, but rather the processes of exile, emigration, creolisation, and the hybridization of languages.[19] Regional literary history, in particular, is beginning to occupy an ever more prominent

place, as it endeavours to heed and reveal the “ambiguities and overlaps” (Gellner) in situations of plurilingualism and ethnic border-crossing concealed by the centralized nation-state.[20]

The business of literary history has been transformed dramatically also by the changing media of appropriating and consuming literature. First of all, the pattern of the consumption of literature underwent a significant alteration, placing the texts of the canon within easy reach through numerous visual adaptations, thus destabilizing their very nature as canonic works of *literature* and erasing the boundary between “high” and “popular.” Moreover, modern media, in particular the interactive technologies, have brought about an unprecedented openness of the text to simultaneous modification by the recipient. The status of the text has changed beyond the comfortable manageability on which traditional literary history rests. The disobedient text that emerges from the process of electronic interaction is open-ended, mobile as never before, and truly boundless. Literature thus moves freely between centre and periphery, enfeebling the conceptual framework posited by these two notions. Not only from the point of view of transnational border-crossing, migration, and exile, but also from that of media theory has a clear distinction between centre and periphery, between “minor” and “major” literary texts become highly suspect. In the age of incessant transnational information flows literature no longer has fixed abode or audience (in Ottmar Ette’s words, literature has lost its “permanent address”[21]), nor does it any longer come with secure value markers attached to it.

Crucially, all the factors I have discussed in this article, including the dramatically changing ideas and practices of education, which put the sustainability of the old disciplinary knowledge under such enormous strain, along with the dwindling power of the nation-state to guard and inculcate the values of the traditional canons, or to form new ones, seem to be pointing in the same direction: the axiological discrimination between “small” and “great,” “minor” and “major” literatures becomes increasingly untenable. As a matter of fact, this very distinction, as I essayed to demonstrate, is itself a historical product with — as any other time-bound product — a limited life-span: the distinction between “major” and “minor” literatures was the outcome of an era of thriving national traditions and strong nation states, but also — equally important — of a complacent Eurocentric framework populated and propped by the contributory narratives of various artistic *isms*, which, in their totality, constituted the coordinated space of the “republic of letters,” apparently homogenous but below the surface built on cultural hierarchies and ridden by conflicts, revolts, and struggles for international domination and

significance.[22] To describe its map, the categories of centre and periphery, canon and deviation, focus and margin were meaningfully employed. This conceptual apparatus now looks increasingly challenged and enfeebled by the encounter with a newly constituted transnational cultural process, in which evaluative discriminations are ever more difficult to uphold. Instead, we are entering the regime of a complex (and constant) marginocentricity,[23] in which centre and periphery become fluid, mobile, and provisional, prone to swapping their places and exchanging cultural valences.

This is not to say that inequalities disappear; as a matter of fact, globalization does create and reveal new sets of inequalities. But we need to begin to acknowledge that, in the same breath, it renders the opposition between centre and periphery less meaningful, as it moves away from the idea of a shared (Euro-North American) canon that underpins this distinction in the first place. Rather, we are witnessing a new regime of relevance where difference — drawn not least from what we used to call the zones of cultural marginality — is commodified and homogenized into a single, globally marketed cultural product;[24] the defiant spirit of marginality and "minor literatures" is processed away, leaving us with a new stock of goods that change hands smoothly — at airports and, virtually, in a myriad of chat-rooms.

Of course, it remains important to uncover the traces of that lost potentiality, of the activist marginality that globalization tends to obliterate so insidiously. At the same time we might be well-advised to admit that one of the most unpalatable effects of globalization has indeed been to confront us with the reality of the minor now functioning as a "fixed" feature, a reterritorialized appellation, a commodity label. Alas, this new, static condition of ready-to-consume "minority" has very little to do with the productive and challenging "becoming" that extracts "continuous variation," to recall Deleuze and Guattari's later imperative. Instead, we are in the grip of a regime of relevance that suspends the process of "becoming" and "installs a new constant,"[25] in which major and minor, canonical and marginal have only limited conceptual validity.[26]

Notes

1. See Deleuze and Guattari (1986) and (1988: 106).

2. See Ani Ilkov's poem "Edin zmei v Tsarigrad" (51).

3. See Ilkov's poem "Otpad"tsi na edin zmei [(b) 'Malarmeta']" (54).

4. For earlier mentions of Bulgaria in the literatures of Western Europe, see Staitscheva.

5. Further details can be found in Traikov. For more on the dynamics and ideology of translating Bulgarian literature in the West see Tihanov.
6. See Robert Fine’s critique in Fine (9-14).
7. See Aretov 65-7; on Shishmanov and the growth of Balkan Studies, see also Mishkova 67-70.
8. The following discussion draws partly on arguments developed in my article “The Future of Literary History: Three Challenges in the 21st Century.” *Primerjalna književnost* 31.1 (2008): 65-72 (Romanian translation: “Viitorul istoriei literare: trei provocari pentru secolul XXI.” *Analele Universitatii Bucuresti* 57 (2008): 89-96; Slovene translation: “Prihodnost literarne zgodovine: trije izzivi 21.stoletja.” *Primerjalna književnost v 20. stoletju in Anton Ocvirk*. Ed. Darko Dolinar and Marko Juvan. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2008. 325-32; Hungarian translation: “Az irodalomtörténet jövője: Három kihívás a 21. században.” *Korunk* 23.2 (2012): 49-54.
9. See Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 12.
10. For a skeptical take, from a different perspective, on the argument in Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, see Biti (75-6).
11. See e.g. the project for a shared textbook of Balkan history supported by the Pact for Stability, as reported in Portalski.
12. See Greenblatt.
13. See also Greenblatt’s later take on cultural mobility in the opening and concluding essays to Greenblatt.
14. Cf. Bate.
15. See above all Baudrillard’s notorious pamphlet *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.
16. See Hillis Miller.
17. See Habermas.
18. For a wider picture of the methodological and civic anxieties of literary scholarship in the twenty-first century, see most recently Alber et al. and Olsen and Pettersson.
19. On various new forms of hybridity in literature, see, for example, Sturm-Trigonakis and Knauth.
20. Cf. Strutz (254), from whom I borrow some of the terminology here.
21. See the argument in Ette; the German original was published in 2001 under the title *Literatur in Bewegung. Raum und Dynamik grenzüberschreitenden Schreibens in Europa und Amerika*.
22. See Casanova .
23. I extend and radicalise here the notion of marginocentricity applied by Marcel Cornis-Pope to what he calls the ‘marginocentric cities’ of Eastern Europe; he defines ‘marginocentric cities’ as peripheral cities which display a “tendency to challenge the hegemony of the metropolitan centers, offering an alternative to their national pull” (Cornis-Pope 8).
24. On the process I term ‘commodification of difference’, see also Tihanov.
25. The quoted words in this and the previous sentence are from Deleuze and Guattari (104).

26. I am grateful to Vladimir Biti and Henrike Schmidt for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Works Cited

Alber, Jan, et al., eds. *Why Study Literature*? Aarhus: Aarhus UP, 2011.

Aretov, Nikolai. „Slaviansko vs. balkansko.“ *Pod znaka na evropeiskite kulturni dialozi. Sbornik v pamet na profesor Boian Nichev*. Ed. Khristina Balabanova et al.. Sofia: Sofia UP, 2007. 62-71.

Bate, Jonathan. "A Monumental Task. Why the new Oxford English History will differ from its predecessor?" *The Times Literary Supplement* 4 October 2002.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

Biti, Vladimir. "In the Name of the Altogether Other." *Writing Literary History: Selected Perspectives from Central Europe*. Ed. Darko Dolinar and Marko Juvan. Bern: Peter Lang. 2006. 67-79.

Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 2004 [French ed. 1999].

Cornis-Pope, Marcel, and John Neubauer. *Towards a History of the Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe: Theoretical Reflections* [ACLS Occasional Paper, 52]. New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2002.

Cornis-Pope, Marcel. "Introduction: Representing East-Central Europe's Marginocentric Cities." *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Vol. 2. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2006. 8-11.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [French ed. 1975].

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London: The Athlone Press, 1988 [French ed. 1980].

Ette, Ottmar. *Literature on the Move*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003 [German ed. 2001]. Print.

Fine, Robert. *Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Racial Memory and Literary History." *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 50-62.

Greenblatt, Stephen et al. *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003 [German ed. 2001].

Hillis Miller, J. "A defense of literature and literary study in a time of globalization and the new tele-technologies." *Neohelicon* 34.2 (2007): 13-22.

Ilkov, Ani. *Mala AZiIA na Dushata*. Sofia: Izdatelsko atelie Ab, 2004.

Knauth, Alfons K. „Weltliteratur: Von der Mehrsprachigkeit zur Mischsprachigkeit.“ *Literatur und Vielsprachigkeit*. Ed. Monika Schmitz-Emans. Heidelberg: Synchron, 2004. 81-110.

Mishkova, Diana. “What is in Balkan History? Spaces and Scales in the Tradition of Southeast-European Studies.” *Southeastern Europe* 34 (2009): 60-91.

Olsen, Stein Haugom, and Anders Pettersson, eds. *Why Literary Studies? Raisons D’être of a Discipline*. Oslo: Novus Press, 2011.

Portalski, A. “S kakvo zapochvat rodinata i Evropa.” *Literaturen vestnik* [Sofia] 15 May 2002.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* [1815]. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Ed. Ernst Behler. Vol. 6. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1961.

Staitscheva, Emilia. “Zur bulgarischen Motivik in der deutschen Literatur. Eine Randerscheinung bezüglich Interkulturalität.“ *Interkulturalität und Nationalkultur in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*. Ed. Maja Razboynikova-Frateva and Hans-Gerd Winter. Dresden: Thelem, 2006. 393-401.

Strutz, Janez. „Dialogue, Polyphony, and System: On the Issue of a History of the ‚Small Literatures’ in the Alps-Adriatic Region.“ *Writing Literary History: Selected Perspectives from Central Europe*. Ed. Darko Dolinar and Marko Juvan. Bern: Peter Lang. 2006. 237-63.

Sturm-Trigonakis, Elke. *Global playing in der Literatur. Ein Versuch über die neue Weltliteratur*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2007.

Tihanov, Galin. “The Future of Literary History: Three Challenges in the 21st Century.” *Primerjalna književnost* 31.1 (2008): 65-72.

—. “Appropriations of Bulgarian Literature in the West: From Pencho Slaveikov to Iordan Iovkov.” *Bulgaria and Europe: Shifting Identities*. Ed. Stefanos Katsikas. London: Anthem, 2010. 33-42; 212-215 (notes).

—. “Cosmopolitanism in the Discursive Landscape of Moderntiy: Two Enlightenment Articulations.” *Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism*. Ed. David Adams and Galin Tihanov. London: Legenda, 2011. 133-152.

Traikov, Veselin. *B“lgarska khudozhestvena literatura na chuzhdi ezitsi (1823-1962)*. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1964.

责任编辑：郑　杰